
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry:

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office, lost in thought, as he stroked a flaming red bird that trilled contentedly. There was but a week left until the new school year began. He always looked forward to the arrival of a new batch of first years, happy little things, anxious to learn. This year he had something more to ponder though. This was the year that Harry Potter would come to Hogwarts. Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, defeater of Voldemort, and savior of the wizarding world...

Of course, the boy wouldn't know much about that. Albus himself had left him with his only surviving relatives ten years ago. They were muggles, and not the most friendly at that. If he'd had any other choice... but no, there was the matter of the blood protection. It wasn't certain that all of Voldemort's supporters were locked up in Azkaban. Quite a few got off claiming the imperious curse. Therefore, the only way to ensure young Harry's safety was to keep him hidden within the wards Dumbledore had constructed around Privet Drive.

The headmaster was interrupted from his musings by a knock on the door. He must be getting old, he mused, not many people could surprise Albus Dumbledore. They claimed it was annoying the way he seemed to know everything that happened at Hogwarts. He would only twinkle knowingly, and offer them a lemon drop. He found the resulting exasperated refusals quite amusing.

"Come in, Minerva."

The door opened revealing his very irritated colleague, "How do you always know it's me?"

He just smiled in response, "Tell me, professor, what brings you to my office at this time. Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no, everything's fine, Albus. I've just finished the list of first years that will be present on the Hogwarts Express," she paused for a moment, looking uncertain, "There is just one little thing..."

Dumbledore stopped petting his phoenix, and Fawkes flew to his perch, noticing the sudden tension. Dumbledore leaned forward in concern. It was unusual to see the normally stern Deputy Headmistress so anxious looking.

"You see," she continued, "we haven't received any confirmation from Mr. Potter. I don't believe he received his letter. You know I've always had my doubts about those muggles-"

"Now, Minerva, I know you don't approve of them,"

Professor McGonagall gave an uncharacteristic snort. If Dumbledore heard, he showed no sign.

"But do you really believe they would harm their own flesh and blood? Certainly Petunia and Lily didn't always get along, but Harry is their nephew," he stated firmly.

He'd had this discussion many times with his old friend. After observing the Dursley family for a single day, he recalled her referring to them as 'the worst bunch of muggles she'd ever seen.' He knew she'd have continued to rant at him that night if hadn't told her about the wards. She'd finally relented, but only just.

"I'll tell you what, Minerva. Why don't you go deliver Mr. Potter's letter personally. After all, it's not that unlikely for a witch of wizard to visit the home of a muggleborn student in order to help them adjust to the wizarding world."

When she moved to protest, he continued, "Take Hagrid with you. I can't count the number of times he's asked to go see James and Lily's son. Besides, I'm sure the Dursleys could always use a little persuasion," his eyes sparkled mischievously as he said the last part. He didn't normally approve of violence, but something told him Vernon Dursley could use a scare.

McGonagall looked quite ready to be on her way now.

"I'll see you in a few hours, Albus," she announced briskly, checking that her wand was safely stowed in her robes.

"Farewell, Minerva. But please, don't do anything permanent," he called after her retreating form.

She waved her hand casually in acknowledgement as the winding staircase descended. Back in his office, Dumbledore released a small chuckle at his old friend's antics but sobered up quickly. He worried over what could have happened to the boy. Why hadn't he received his letter? The phoenix let out an encouraging note, as though sensing his master's worry. Maybe the owl just got lost in all the protection charms surround Little Whinging? Somehow, the headmaster doubted that...

4 Privet Drive, Surrey:

Vernon Dursley was just sitting down to breakfast with his family. He smiled contentedly as he rifled through the paper. He and his family lived in a nice house, in a nice normal neighborhood. He had a wonderful job selling drills. If he wasn't mistaken, Grunnings would be filling quite a large order for that new hardware store today.

He looked up when a plate of eggs was set in front of him, "Why, Petunia, this looks wonderful."

"Thank you, Vernon," she gave her husband a peck on the cheek. "So Duddykins, what are you and your friends going to do today?" she looked fondly at her eleven-year-old son as he dug into another stack of pancakes.

"Piers and I are gonna go to the movies," he said around a mouthful of food. What Dudley neglected to mention, was that they were going to sneak into the movies. Unfortunately, his parents were oblivious to that. In their eyes, Dudley was a wonderful, sweet boy. In the eyes of the kids Dudley's gang beat up on a regular basis, he was a pig in a wig, whose size would be hilarious if he didn't use it to sit on small children.

"That sounds great, son. Here, make sure you get plenty of popcorn," Vernon said, handing over several pounds. Dudley snatched it in his pudgy hand, and was contemplating how much more he would need

to steal to afford some Mars Bars as well. That shrimp, Mark Evans, was always good for some loose change...

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Bloody mailman, I thought I told him to stop delivering those letters," Vernon grumbled as he got up.

For the past month, strange letters addressed in emerald ink kept turning up. He was quick to dispose of the first couple and nailed shut the mail slot. Petunia even called the post office to complain. But still, the envelopes found their way to Vernon's job. Then the very suspicious looking milkman dropped a dozen off when he picked up the bottles. And those bloody owls! They were always perched over the garage when Vernon came home, and were starting to attract the attention of the whole street! Petunia nearly had a heart attack when one came flying into her kitchen before he managed to chase it out with a broom. The way Vernon saw it, as soon as Dudley went off to Smeltings, he and Petunia were off to stay with Marge. Hopefully, by the time they came back, those freaks would have given up.

He stopped at the front door, and yanked it open angrily, "I told you before, we don't-" Vernon broke off as he took in the people on his doorstep. There was a strict looking woman in an odd black dress and pointed hat. Behind her stood a man with a tangled black beard, dressed in what looked like animal skins. He was so tall Vernon had to crane his neck back painfully. That, combined with Vernon's bulging eyes and slightly open jaw made a very comical sight. McGonagall's commanding demeanor almost slipped with the urge to laugh at the man.

"Hello," she stepped forward, reasserting herself, "I am Professor McGonagall, and this is Rubeus Hagrid. We are here for Mr. Harry Potter."

Vernon, in an attempt to regain his dignity, straightened up and barked, "I have no idea who you're talking about, now get off my property before I call the police!"

McGonagall replied coldly, "We are not leaving until we see your nephew, Mr. Dursley."

She strode forward, beckoning to Hagrid. They pushed aside a sputtering Vernon Dursley and entered the house.

"Vernon? What's going on?" Petunia Dursley came out of the kitchen still drying a frying pan. As soon as she caught sight of the intruders, she gasped and held up the dripping pan threateningly, "What are you... *people* doing here? I demand you leave at once!" she screeched.

"Where's 'Arry?" Hagrid rumbled.

Petunia paled drastically, "I-I don't know w-who you're t-talking about!"

McGonagall's eyes narrowed dangerously, "We've come to collect Mr. Potter."

"There is no Potter here!"

"Tha's a lie!" Hagrid roared, taking a threatening step forward and causing Petunia to drop the pan in fright, "I was here when we left 'im!"

"He's correct Mrs. Dursley. Against my better judgment, Harry Potter was left to your care ten years ago, after the death of his parents. Now I will ask one more time, *where is he?*"

By now, Dudley had heard the yelling. Curiosity got the better of him, and he waddled out of the kitchen, "Mum, what's going on? Who are they?"

McGonagall heard Dudley and turned to question him, "Hello, we're just looking for your cousin. Can you tell me where he is?" she asked calmly.

"Who? That freak? My parents got rid of him ages ago."

Now, Dudley Dursley was never the smartest boy. If he was, he'd have known that was a very stupid thing to say.

"You what?" McGonagall hissed turning on the quivering Dursleys.

"What did ye do with 'Arry?"

Hagrid was known to be a very gentle person, despite his imposing figure, but sometimes he could be very scary, especially when he was angry. That certainly came in handy right now, as Petunia and Vernon backed up.

"We, er..." Vernon trailed off.

"Spit it out already!" McGonagall snapped, ready to hex the Dursleys into oblivion if it weren't for those darn muggle protection laws.

"The boy was nothing but trouble!" Petunia spat. Her temper rose, giving her a burst of confidence, and she continued, "We never wanted the brat! He was just as freaky as my sister and her good-for-nothing husband! It's not my fault she went and got herself blown up! So we left him at an orphanage years ago, just like we should have in the first place!"

By now, both Hagrid and McGonagall were red-faced and shaking with rage. Hagrid growled and charged the muggles, but McGonagall was quicker. She whipped out her wand and pointed it at Dudley.

"Verus Figura!"

There was flash a violet light, and Petunia screamed.

She ran over to Dudley, who, by all outward appearances, seemed perfectly fine. Suddenly, he reached behind his back, groping in confusion. Whatever he found caused his eyes to widen in shock. Dudley squealed and ran into the kitchen, his mother following. The last glimpse anyone had of him was a curly pig's tail poking through his trousers.

McGonagall smirked in a satisfied way and slipped her wand back up her sleeve.

"How dare you! Fix my son this instant!" Vernon advanced on her, fist raised. He didn't get far before Hagrid lifted him in one massive hand, and slammed him into the wall, his feet kicking uselessly.

McGonagall sauntered over and fixed him with a glare that could rival Severus Snape's.

"One last thing before we go, Mr. Dursley. What was the name of that orphanage?"

St. Margaret's Home for Orphaned Children:

"Harry, are you sure we can pull this off?" a voice whispered in the dark hallway.

"Don't worry, Blaise. Everything's under control. Just keep Cromwell busy."

Blue eyes met green before she nodded and took off around the corner.

A boy in worn jeans and a baggy t-shirt was left in the corridor, leaning against the wall impatiently. Bright green eyes hidden behind round glasses watched as the girl tiptoed past a closed door with light spilling underneath. As soon as she was clear, she sped up, her long, reddish-brown hair streaming in her wake. From inside the room, an oily voice could be heard arguing over the phone.

A pale hand brushed back untidy black hair nervously, revealing a lightning bolt-shaped scar. Despite Harry's assurances to his best friend, he was worried about being caught. Mr. Cromwell, the head of St. Margaret's Orphanage, had it in for Harry. He hated orphans, and didn't bother to hide that fact. However, a nerve always seemed to twitch when Harry was in his presence. If asked about it, Harry would say Cromwell couldn't stand anyone that stood up to him. Blaise would say he couldn't stand anyone that rigged his chair to break when he sat in it, balanced a bucket of water over his door, or Harry's personal favorite, left snakes in his bed. People always wondered how he had accomplished that, but Harry wouldn't tell even if he could explain it himself.

Cromwell was definitely not the type of person you should hire to watch emotionally scarred children. He was greedy git who got vindictive pleasure out of pushing around those younger and weaker than he was. He used the money donated to the orphanage for himself. While the orphans were forced to wear old, worn out clothing, sleep in creaky bunk beds in barely furnished rooms, and eat whatever mush the cafeteria decided to pass off as meatloaf, Cromwell drove a shiny BMW, and it was rumored he'd purchased a new summer home in Majorca as well.

St. Margaret's wasn't the nicest orphanage. It was an old-fashioned brick building in the poorer side of London, surrounded by a high metal fence. They said it was to keep the children safe. Harry and Blaise suspected it was to keep them in.

So here was Harry, crouching in the shadows near Cromwell's personal office, awaiting the start of a new prank. Some of the older kids thought Harry had a death wish. Others got a kick out of watching Cromwell scream like a girl, and would often pretend that they didn't hear Harry and Blaise sneaking around at night.

He ran over the plan in his mind once more. Blaise would set off the distraction, causing Cromwell to leave his office and investigate. Harry would use that time to run into his office...

A loud crash resonated through the building, along with the sound of cracking wood and squealing girls. Harry swore he could feel the floor shake for a moment. It seemed like Blaise had done her part. He'd have to remember to ask her what she did to make so much noise.

The conversation in the office ceased, and the door slammed open. Cromwell stumbled down the hall cursing, and muttered what sounded like, "Bloody orphans!"

Harry had to hurry before Cromwell figured out what was going on. The second he turned the corner, Harry ran forward and stopped the door from shutting with his foot. He took one last look around the deserted hallway. Once he was sure the coast was clear, he slipped into the cramped room. A large desk covered in paperwork took up most of the far wall, with a telephone balanced precariously on the edge. An open window was to his left, giving him a view of the dusty courtyard out front. Harry peered through the dirty glass, grimacing at the rusty gates that separated him from the outside world.

Harry cut short his observations when the yelling from upstairs reminded him of the time limit. Plopping into a brown leather chair, he swiveled toward the desk. He pulled out a twisted hairpin, courtesy of one of Blaise's roommates, not that they knew she'd nicked it, and picked one of the easier locks before rifling through the drawer.

"Hmm, let's see, what do we have here?" Harry lifted some official-looking papers to the dim lamp light and read, "*Congratulations, Mr. Cromwell, on your purchase... We hope you will enjoy your stay at our cottage suites... relaxation... sunny beaches... Majorca...*" Harry sneered. So the rumors were true! Blaise owed him five pounds.

Speaking of Blaise, it sounded as though Cromwell had screamed himself hoarse, probably demanding the orphans fix whatever damage had been done. There wasn't much time.

Harry reached in and felt around... there! He smirked as he pulled out a set of keys. He tucked them in his pocket, and made sure the desk looked like it hadn't been touched. No reason to make Cromwell suspicious too early.

Harry made it out just in time. He ducked into a nearby broom cupboard just as Cromwell's heavy foot steps came up the corridor. After waiting for the telltale slam of a door, he climbed back out, heading toward the dorms. Harry made it to the room he shared with three other boys without any interference. Two of his roommates, Ben and Alan were on the floor playing with a most likely stolen pack of cards. They glanced at Harry warily. It was obvious he had something to do with the shouting earlier. He pretended not to notice and sat on one of the bottom bunks.

A few minutes later, the door slammed open, and Blaise leaned against it looking like she had run all the way.

"Hey, Blaise, how'd it go?"

She took a seat next to Harry and tried to calm down her breathing, "That was close! Bugger almost caught me!"

"I meant to ask, what did you do? It sounded like the time we pushed Ms. Campbell's desk down the main staircase," he had a glazed look in his eyes as he remembered the havoc they had wreaked.

Ms. Campbell was the history teacher at the orphanage. She was a stiff old woman who couldn't appreciate a good joke, especially when it was on her. Once, during a particularly dull lecture, her graying hair had turned an electric blue. She automatically blamed Harry, though

he had no idea how he could have done it. After all, he was half-asleep at the time, and just imagining what his teacher would look like with a change of hairstyle... he couldn't have done it, right?

As punishment, he had to scrub all the windows on the second floor. To retaliate for the unfair treatment, Blaise and Harry had wheeled her desk out of the classroom, and *accidentally* pushed it down the main staircase, the students' homework still inside the drawers.

Harry looked over at Blaise to see her smiling innocently, "Well, it was kind of last minute, and I couldn't think of anything loud enough, and her room was nearby... Her desk was too heavy to move by myself, so one of the student desks had to suffice. By the way," she turned to Ben with a sheepish grin, "You're going to have to find a new seat."

"Don't worry about it," he waved aside her apology, "I was planning on skipping History tomorrow anyway-"

He was cut off when Alan smacked his arm, frowning disapprovingly, "And you weren't going to tell me? Count me in! I could use the extra sleep anyway."

"Anyway," Blaise rolled her eyes at the two and turned to her partner in crime, "Did you get them?"

Harry smirked and pulled out the master key ring, giving them a triumphant jingle. Blaise reached for them reverently, looking as though she held the entire world in her hands, which, for them, was probably true.

Harry gently pried the keys from Blaise's hands as she seemed reluctant to let them go, and he stowed them under his mattress where they wouldn't be seen. When that was done, he leaned in conspiratorially, "Now, on to plan B..."

Hogwarts:

Dumbledore sat in his office staring out the window pensively. He had a perfect view of the grounds. On any other day, he might have

enjoyed the sight of the sun setting over the forbidden forest, with the golden sky silhouetting the trees. However, today was not like any other day. His fears had only increased after speaking with Professor McGonagall. It was getting late, and he still hadn't heard from his two most trusted colleagues.

A timely knock on the door brought back the twinkle that had dimmed throughout the day. He replaced his usual serene expression and checked that his customary bowl of lemon drops sat close by, "Come in."

Professor McGonagall walked in, holding the door open for Hagrid as he squeezed through. Neither looked very pleased, although McGonagall fingered her wand with an expression of satisfaction.

"How did it go?"

McGonagall spoke first, her mouth thinned, "Not well, Albus. The *Dursleys*," she spat the name like a curse word, "were not very cooperative at first."

Dumbledore raised an eyebrow expectantly, waiting for her to continue. Instead, Hagrid jumped in, "Professor, they-*sniffle*-they..." he struggled, finally dissolving into tears.

The headmaster frowned concernedly before conjuring a large purple handkerchief, and handing it to the sobbing giant. He turned his penetrating blue stare to the barely-composed head of Gryffindor, "Minerva, what happened?"

"Albus, they *abandoned* him! *They sent him to an orphanage!*"

Dumbledore looked taken aback. He certainly hadn't expected anything of that magnitude, "How long ago," he asked calmly, belying the fury blazing in his eyes.

"He was about five at the time," she answered, reigning in her emotions.

Dumbledore sat back, looking older than ever, "Did you get the name of the orphanage?"

He was surprised to see McGonagall's eyes light up, "Oh, yes, Mr. Dursley was very helpful."

The twinkle returned only slightly diminished as Dumbledore asked, "What did you do to him?"

"Not much, though he's seen the true side of his son."

"Really?" Dumbledore's beard twitched.

"Oh, yes, it was a nice, curly pig's tail."

Dumbledore couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing. Even Hagrid managed a watery chuckle. Dumbledore wiped his eyes and sat up with new determination, "Now, you said you know the orphanage where Harry was placed?" McGonagall nodded. "Then I think it is time we sent Mr. Potter a letter."

"Haaarry..."

"What, Blaise?"

"Is it time yet?"

"No."

"Oh, come on! I'm dying to get started!" Blaise widened her blue eyes at Harry in classic puppy dog fashion, and pouted for good measure.

"Blaise!" Harry glared at his overeager friend and went back to scanning the crowded cafeteria, *'Let's see... where's Cromwell?'* A loud voice in the back drew Harry's attention as a stout man in a blue suit with his greasy hair slicked back, called for the cook to hurry up. The unappreciated woman sneered in disgust as he turned his back to sit at the teacher's table. *'Bingo,'* Harry thought.

"Do you think Cromwell's there yet? What if something goes wrong? Are you sure you put it in his food? What if it got into someone else's? Did-"

"Blaise!" Harry interrupted her rambling.

"What!" she snapped back annoyed that he interrupted her.

"It's time."

"Yes!"

"Shh!"

"Oops..."

Harry opened the door and gestured for Blaise to follow. Everyone was too absorbed in eating and conversations to notice the duo's late entrance. Harry walked to a table near the doors inconspicuously, none of the talking children giving him a second glance. Blaise, of course, tripped over someone's shoe, which resulted in a small scuffle when the older boy began flirting outrageously with her and

Harry was forced to drag the infuriated girl away before she caused him any bodily harm.

They finally sat down at a table across from Ben and Alan. Blaise was still fuming, while Harry rolled his eyes. Before he could get a word in edgewise, Blaise politely told him to shut up. Harry complied, holding back a snigger, and turned toward the main attraction.

He watched through narrowed eyes as Cromwell tucked into his food, taking in every movement the man made. Blaise had her hands twisting anxiously in her lap. Across the table, Ben grabbed the attention of his best friend and pointed at the other two. Of course, after several years in their company, he would recognize the look in their eyes anywhere. The fun was about to begin...

Several Hours Earlier:

"Blaise, is she gone?"

"No... wait, yes, there she goes! Okay, now's your chance!"

"Cover me..." with that, Harry picked up a brown sack and opened the recently unlocked door to the kitchens, quietly tossing the keys to Blaise on his way.

Looking around the dimly lit kitchens, Harry could just make out the form of the head cook speaking to someone at the back door. He knew, even though he couldn't see it, that it was a delivery truck from the high-class French restaurant, Chez Pierre's. After careful observation, or as Blaise called it, plain dumb luck, Harry had discovered that the truck dropped off Cromwell's breakfast every morning at six.

'Just another reason to hate that git,' Harry thought, 'While the rest of us are forced to live off canned mush, he's spending more of the orphanage's donations on croissants!'

Harry stopped less than five feet from the cook, ducking behind the sink. He dropped the bag none too gently on the tile floor and a barely audible hissing issued from it.

"Oops, sorry, Sneak," Harry whispered down at what looked like a coiled black rope at the bottom of the bag. The rope shifted, and a pair of luminous green eyes peered at him.

"Be more careful, you clumsyy human! You're going to get me killed one of these daysss! I agreed to help you sscaare the fat one, the leasst you could do is keep from ssnapping my spine!"

Harry rolled his eyes. Sneak was so dramatic sometimes; he was spending way too much time around Blaise, **"Do you even have a spine, Sneak?"**

"That'sss not the point!" he snapped.

Harry shrugged, knowing the argument was pointless, and turned his attention back to the mission. This was just another in the long and memorable list of things Harry and Blaise had done to torment the head of the orphanage over the years. Personally, Harry thought this was going to be one of his favorites.

Plan A had been the distraction Blaise had set off only days ago in order for Harry to slip into Cromwell's office. He got in and out without a hitch and was successful in that they now had possession of the master key ring. One of those keys enabled him access to the kitchens, a feat that had been impossible since that time Harry was caught trying to force the main lock open with a spork. It would have worked too, if Cromwell hadn't ordered a new one that was impossible to open without the key.

Now it was time for Plan B, or as Blaise had jokingly named it, Operation Loss of Appetite. It was well named in Harry's opinion, because he knew Cromwell would be wary of anything he ate after this.

The most vital part of the prank was the temperamental reptile rustling in the bag next to him. The snake was an old friend of Harry's, one he'd met in the most unusual circumstances. After all, it's not every day that you're trying to break out of the orphanage, only to have your attempt interrupted by a hissing voice screaming to watch where you step. Harry couldn't have been more surprised if the snake

had actually started cursing at him, which he did when he realized the 'idiot human that couldn't watch where he was going' understood him.

Not understanding in the least how he was holding a slightly hysterical conversation with an animal, Harry just gave up asking himself. It wasn't like the snake could tell him anyway. He ended up returning to the dorm room at one in the morning, the snake wrapped around his arm. After Blaise stopped asking if he was insane, they decided to keep him. Sneak, as they called him, actually wasn't half bad when you got over the arrogance, unlimited sarcasm, and disdain for the human race. He also didn't mind tagging along with the duo as he had nowhere else to go in the middle of London. Sneak also admitted, grudgingly, that Harry wasn't completely hopeless for conversation. Blaise, of course, knew nothing of their whispered exchanges. Really, how do you explain to your best friend that you talk to your pet, and he talks back?

This happened to be one of the rare occasions that Sneak agreed to take part in their mischief. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy watching their pranks, but his sense of self preservation overruled his love of scaring people. The last time he became involved, was when Harry asked him to hide in Cromwell's private rooms. The entire orphanage could hear his screams when he woke up to find a snake slithering up his chest. Sneak didn't find it so amusing though when he was thrown out a window. He was participating in their latest prank solely for revenge.

Harry watched as the cook deposited a plastic bag on the counter. While she was occupied paying the delivery boy, Harry crept closer, cradling the sack. Trying not make a sound, he pulled out the slightly warm styrofoam box. At the same time, he lifted Sneak out of his own bag and into the box. The snake kept quiet for once, eager to begin. Harry tucked the box back onto the counter, and wishing his friend luck, hurried back to Blaise.

Cromwell opened the white box, sniffing the delicious aroma as he picked up a fork. He was too busy to notice his least favorite orphans exchange a quick glance. Blaise grinned excitedly and Harry crossed his fingers...

"AAAAAAARGH!"

Every head in the cafeteria turned toward the head table, and nearly half of the orphans burst out laughing. Cromwell had jumped out of his seat, shrieking as a black snake came flying out of his food. Sneak improvised the situation by darting up the crazed man's sleeve. The laughter doubled when Cromwell started some kind of frenzied dance in an attempt to shake Sneak loose.

Mr. Parker, the math teacher spotted the bulge moving down Cromwell's stomach, trapped beneath the polo shirt. The man was too distraught to notice as Mr. Parker lifted his plastic cafeteria tray and swung it back. The wiggling lump slid further down, growing ever closer to the man's belt. Five seconds later, everyone heard a thump as the tray hit, just missing its target. Cromwell, hands cupped protectively, whimpered before falling over in a dead faint.

Across the hall, silence reigned, until a strained snort was heard, breaking the dam. Everyone was gasping for breath, and Alan was slumped over the table while Ben pounded his fist with mirth. Blaise hung onto Harry, who was one of the very few still coherent. He watched as Cromwell's leg twitched and Sneak slid out the bottom of his pants leg, hissing gleefully.

"Ha! Take that, filthy human!"

The snake crawled onto the table, virtually preening as he watched all the children giggling. He shot a smug look at Harry, which turned to confusion as the boy tried to say something over the noise.

"Sneak! Behind you!" Harry pointed urgently, trying to warn him.

"Wha-"

"AAAAHH! SNAKE!" Ms. Campbell's high pitch scream was easily heard throughout the cafeteria. She was pointing frantically at Sneak from her seat, yelling for someone to kill it. Mr. Parker complied, diving for the snake. Sneak gave a startled hiss and fell off the table, just as the teacher slid through the food-streaked tabletop, falling right off the other side.

Harry, meanwhile, was trying to bring Blaise to her senses as he thought of a way to salvage the situation. There was no doubt in his mind that Sneak was going to need a hand, no pun intended.

"Blaise, we have to do something!" He looked at her desperately, trying to ignore the sound of the teachers scrambling under the table.

Blaise bit her lip in concentration. While she didn't have the same attachment her friend did to the snake, she wasn't about to leave a fellow-prankster behind. She scanned the room as though expecting a solution to jump out at her. In a way, it did.

Next to the anxious duo, Ben and Alan were still cracking up as they watched the teachers fumble around on the floor. At one point, two of the adults went for the snake at the same time. He got away, leaving them to crash into each other headfirst. At that very moment, Ben had taken a sip of his orange juice, failing to hold it in, the drink came squirting out of his mouth... and right onto Blaise.

"Eeeack!" Blaise gagged, glaring through her dripping bangs.

"S-sorry," Ben gasped before falling over laughing. His only warning was a low growl before a handful of runny eggs hit him in the face.

Harry watched as Blaise wiped her hand off with a napkin, smirking even as she rung out her sticky hair. Suddenly, it clicked.

As if in a daze, Harry shoved his hand into his own breakfast, scooping up a portion of gooey mush. He pulled his hand back and flung it at a group of girls chatting at the next table. It smacked the nearest one, causing her to screech in disgust. Her friends paused in shock, before one of them found it nearly as hilarious as the snake. She started giggling hopelessly, ignoring the girl's reddening face.

As Harry had anticipated, the first girl flung a bagel at her friend. Knowing this was the time to act, he stood up on the bench, cupping his hands around his mouth, "FOOD FIGHT!"

Blaise pulled him back down just as a pancake went sailing over his head. Harry watched in fascination as the rest of the kids caught on. One by one, breakfast trays were overturned, hunger quickly

forgotten. As the fight progressed, the orphans tossed anything within reach from juice boxes, to bananas. One boy was unfortunate enough to be knocked out with an apple.

Blaise winced as the remains of the red fruit slid across the floor. Tugging Harry under the table for protection, she stared at him as though checking for any shred of sanity. She finally snapped, "You are mad!"

"But brilliant," Harry quipped, scooting over as a puddle of milk oozed under the table.

Blaise snorted in response before looking out at the mayhem her friend had caused. The runaway snake was soon overshadowed by the current disaster. The teachers tried pointlessly to regain control.

"Settle down! Stop this at once!" The English teacher stood up from the floor, disregarding his coworkers' advice to stay down, "Now see here-" he was cut off when he was forced to jump out of the path of a UFO (unidentified flying object, otherwise know as cafeteria food).

Down on the floor, Cromwell was just waking up. He couldn't figure out where he was, only that it wasn't his soft bed, it was kind of sticky actually... and what was that noise? Children? Didn't they give him enough nightmares?

He opened his eyes blearily, struggling to force his overweight body to sit up. He blinked in confusion when he came face to face with his pathetic employees crouched under a table.

"What are you fools-" Cromwell cut off abruptly at the sight of a familiar black shape creeping up his stomach...

"That'sss right! Cower, human! You should know better than to messs with me!"

Cromwell sucked in a breath, looking like he might faint as the snake bared his fangs. Fortunately for him, Sneak gave a disgusted shake of his head before slithering away, hissing about it not being worth it. Thanking his good fortune, Cromwell gave a sigh of relief before

sitting up... just as his box of fruity croissants fell off the table, falling directly onto his head.

"Hee, hee... ssstupid human..." Sneak snickered, watching the man wipe strawberry goo out of his eyes. Flicking out his tongue, Sneak's stomach tingled unhappily. When was the last time he ate? Hissing a little tune, he moved away, swerving around the children in search of a tasty rat. He could usually find those by the rubbish bins...

"Oh, I can't believe you did that!" Blaise gasped as they sat in Harry's room once again, only this time, discussing their success.

"Hey, it worked didn't it?" Harry grinned while wiping jelly off his glasses.

"Worked? It couldn't have gone better!" she squealed, "Did you see the look on Cromwell's face by the time they ended the fight? I've never seen him so furious!"

"You mean ridiculous! But seriously, French food looks good on him."

Both of them burst out laughing, not even bothering to lower their voices. Besides, it wasn't uncommon to hear random bursts of amusement throughout the orphanage after that morning. More than one child had been reprimanded for disrespecting the staff until the teachers gave up. You could only assign so many detentions before realizing it didn't work. Rumor was, Cromwell was locked in his private rooms, still trying to wash strawberry syrup out of his hair.

Harry chuckled as he put back on his semi-clean glasses. His shirt was still covered in random spots of food. Blaise didn't look much better, between her juice-covered hair and grimy pants. *'But that's the price of a food fight...'* Harry thought, *'and it was so worth it.'*

"Do you think the cafeteria's clear yet?" Harry wondered aloud.

"Probably. Janitor might be there, though. Why?" Blaise narrowed her eyes suspiciously, "Harry, you're not thinking of going back there! Hello? Number one rule: never get caught at the scene of the crime!"

Harry rolled his eyes. He knew he shouldn't have taught her those rules. But he had to say *something* the last time she wanted to take a picture of her handiwork for documentation.

"Look, Blaise, I won't be gone long. I just want to grab Sneak. I lost track of him in all the chaos, and I seriously don't trust him by himself."

Blaise huffed, "Harry, sometimes I worry about you. You act like he's a real person! How much trouble can a little snake get into anyway?"

As Harry left the still-ranting Blaise for the cafeteria, he thought over her last statement. How much trouble could Sneak get into? After a moment's thought, Harry speeded up his pace, jumping down the last of the staircase.

"Sneak," Harry's whisper echoed in the empty room. He pushed open the double doors, keeping an eye out for any movement. The only sound was the steady drip of a splotch of food that had somehow ended up on the ceiling.

Harry looked around, ducking under tables and occasionally calling out. His search lead him to the other end of the cafeteria. He was ready to give up when a noise from the rubbish bins caught his attention.

"Sneak, is that you?" Harry struggled to lift himself high enough to see into the nearest bin, cursing his height as he did so. Harry spotted the black snake lying inside, his body coiled in a sulky position, **"Sneak, what are you doing in here?"**

Sneak raised his head, tongue flicking out irritably, **"Oh, I'm jusst looking for leftoverss, deccided to take my time... nothing wrong with that..."** he replied vaguely.

Harry's mouth twitched, **"You got stuck, didn't you?"**

Sneak only glared in response. When Harry started to laugh, he snapped his jaws threateningly, **"Shut up before I bite you!"**

Harry was too busy teasing Sneak to notice someone creeping behind him until it was too late. What finally tipped him off was the sudden shadow looming over him and the heavy hand on his shoulder. He was forcefully spun around, only to find himself looking at an oatmeal-streaked tie. Harry gulped and tilted his head back, locking eyes with a thoroughly pissed off Cromwell. The man sneered and dragged the stunned boy out, not sparing a glance at the place where Sneak was hidden.

When the room was empty, a light hissing could be heard coming from the plastic bin. The old janitor, Mr. Wilkins, came in, frowning at the mess as he hefted his cleaning tools. Shuffling over to start emptying the garbage, his poor hearing never picked up the sounds of the frightened snake.

"Hello? Harry?" Sneak panicked. The stupid human had taken his only friend away... and left him there! **"Harry! I didn't mean what I said! I'd never really bite you... well, there wass that one time... but it wass an acccident! Haaarry! Ssomeone get me out of here, it smellsss funny,"** he whimpered. **"Whoa!"** Suddenly, the container was tipped and being wheeled out, Sneak still inside, **"Ahhh!"**

"Stupid, creepy, obnoxious git... should have told Sneak to bite him..." Harry continued to curse under his breath as he scrubbed the front hall, taking his anger out on a particularly stubborn smudge.

After being physically hauled out of the ruined cafeteria, Harry was forced to listen to the usual tirade about rules and respecting authority, *'Put one more toe out of line, Potter... One of these days, I'll have you sent to St. Brutus'... Only a matter of time before you're on the streets... No wonder your poor relatives left you here...'*

Harry threw the scrubbing brush down angrily as he recalled Cromwell's last sneering comment. He leaned against the wall, trying to calm his temper. There was no reason to let it get to him. No, he wouldn't give Cromwell the satisfaction of knowing how easy it was to break down his barriers.

Sighing, Harry looked at expanse of dry hardwood floor that had yet to be cleaned. As punishment, for something Cromwell had no solid

proof of, he had to wash the entire entrance hall. In his exact words, 'I want to be able to see my reflection in it.' Harry pitied anyone that had to see that hideous face every time they walked through the main doors.

Snorting softly, Harry picked up the brush once more. Hopefully he'd be finished by lunch... he never did get anything to eat. Pursing his lips, Harry crawled on his hands and knees, the soapy brush held in front of him.

Twenty minutes and several splinters later, a light shuffling brought Harry out of his thoughts. He looked up just in time to see two envelopes shoved in the crack between the front doors. Harry frowned warily as he stood up. Didn't the mail carrier know there was a box for letters outside? Moreover, wasn't today a Sunday?

Reaching out a tentative hand, Harry snatched the letters out, as though expecting them to disappear. With them in his hand, he could tell they were made of some strange, old-fashioned paper. It was much thicker, with a yellowish tint. The front of both envelopes had an unfamiliar wax seal. It was an intricate design of the letter 'H', surrounded by four animals; a lion, snake, eagle, and badger. Taking a closer look at one, Harry flipped it over and nearly dropped it in surprise.

**Mr.
The
St.
London**

**H.
Main
Margaret's**

**Potter
Hall
Orphanage**

"That's specific," Harry mused while feeling slightly disturbed. Was someone stalking him?

As if things couldn't get any stranger, Harry turned over the second letter, already anticipating what it might show. Therefore, he managed to hold in a gasp when he saw the other addressee: Miss B. Zabini.

Shoving the mysterious letters in his pocket, Harry felt a moment's indecision as he looked between the unfinished hallway and the staircase leading to the dorms. Turning back to the job at hand, his

sight landed on the bucket of cleaning fluid that Cromwell had left him. A mischievous glint formed in his eye as he walked toward it. He picked it up, wobbling under the uneven weight. Pulling back, he dumped the rest of the foamy water across the floor, sending it a good ten feet.

Observing the slick floor covered in bubbles, Harry grinned, "All done." With that, he took off up the stairs, his hand clutching the letters in his pocket.

Throwing all discretion out the window, Harry barreled down the hallway, his thoughts locked on the contents of his pocket. Not paying any attention to his surroundings, he knocked over a girl coming out of the bathroom. She hurled a few insults, and her brush at him, before stomping off in the opposite direction.

For a moment, he wondered whether Blaise was still waiting in his room. Getting an idea, he slowed his footsteps, pausing underneath one of the fluorescent lights. He dug in his pocket, pulling out her letter.

| | | |
|---------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Miss | B. | Zabini |
| Room | | 205 |
| St. | Margaret's | Orphanage |
| London | | |

Silently thanking his stalkers for the information, Harry ran the familiar path to Blaise's room, not stopping until he went face-first into the door...

"THUMP!"

"What the..." Blaise jumped off her bed, startled. She'd been waiting impatiently for her friend to return ever since he went to retrieve Sneak. At least an hour later, she was still waiting, wondering what could have happened. Just as she was getting ready to go searching herself, something slammed into the door, followed by the sound of a pained groan.

"Harry?" Blaise pulled open the door cautiously, and stared down at her friend in confusion.

He squinted up at her from his seat on the floor, rubbing his head while he looked around. Eventually he found what he was looking for, lifting up the bent frames of his glasses. Shrugging, he placed them on gently before pushing himself up.

"Harry, where have you been-" Blaise held out a hand to help him up but was shocked when he grabbed it, yanking her back into the room

and slamming the door. He checked for any potential eavesdroppers, and then turned the lock for good measure.

Blaise watched all of this, bewildered at what could have gotten into her friend, "Harry, have you finally lost it? Where have you been? Did Cromwell stop you-"

Harry skimmed over his run-in with Cromwell, inwardly wondering what happened to Sneak. When he finished explaining, Blaise opened her mouth to rant, most likely another discussion about his 'saving people thing'. Good 'ole Harry, always sticking up for the little guy, whether it was a new orphan being picked on, or his scaly little friend getting into trouble.

He managed to forestall any lectures by pulling a crumpled envelope out of his pocket, and shoving it under her nose, "Blaise, look at this."

Frowning, she unfolded the yellowish parchment, Harry reading over her shoulder. Both of them scanned the letter silently, neither commenting until Blaise looked up, her wide blue eyes meeting his.

"Is-is this a joke?" she asked weakly.

Harry shrugged and reached into his pocket again, "I got one too," he said quietly. Opening it up, they found a message nearly identical to Blaise's if not for the salutation:

Dear Mr. Potter,

We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Enclosed you will find a list of supplies. The train leaves from King's Cross Station, Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ on September 1st.

Yours Sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

"What do you think?" Harry asked, running a hand through his messy hair, which only served to make it worse.

"It can't be real. Probably some trick cooked up by Cromwell," she spat, throwing the letter on the bed in disgust, "It was only a matter of time before he tried to get rid of us! Though I didn't think even he would be stupid enough to try something like this! I mean, come on! How gullible does he think we are? A school for magic?" Blaise snorted.

Harry narrowed his eyes, rereading his own letter, "I dunno, Blaise. This doesn't seem his style..."

"Harry, you can't really believe this rubbish?"

"But what if it's real?" Harry whispered.

For a moment, Blaise could see the desperation shining through the mask he put up. Harry was always trying to act the light-hearted prankster, never letting onto how hard it was sometimes. He, more than anyone she knew, wished for a way out. Most of the children at St. Margaret's came from unknown origins. It wasn't the nicest facility, used to house the kids abandoned at birth, or those that were picked up off the streets. Many had parents that died at some point or another, and they had no other relatives to take them in. Harry was one of the sadder cases, having come from a family that simply didn't want him.

Blaise sighed, giving in to her best friend, "Alright, say it is true... what now?"

Harry responded with a tiny smile before looking back at the letter. Suddenly his eyes paused on the page, "That's it!"

"What's it?" she asked warily.

"Right there, it says we can buy our school supplies at some place called *The Leaky Cauldron*. It's right here in London!"

"Okay... that's a start, but how do you propose we get there? We can't exactly ask Cromwell for a ride. Oh, and did you forget the big,

pointy fence surrounding this place? How would we get out by ourselves?" she questioned, her voiced laced heavily with doubt.

Harry reached into his pocket once more, and Blaise's eyes lit up in understanding as he pulled out the set of stolen keys, "Why, we do what we do best," he smirked, "sneak out."

"Psst! Blaise!" Harry whispered though the door. Both had been planning this for days, and the plan was foolproof... hopefully. They were in a bit of a hurry. August was nearly over, and if the letters were to be believed, they only had until September 1st.

The door swung open silently, thanks to years of practice, and Blaise slipped out. She was wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, and an equally dark sweater. She'd even gone so far as to paint the cliché streaks of black makeup on her cheeks. Harry rolled his eyes at the dramatics as he helped her with one of the over-stuffed backpacks she was carrying. They had agreed to take as much as they could carry, not that they had many possessions, but who knew when they'd be coming back? Even if this whole school turned out to be a hoax, they would have to lay low for a while before returning. Cromwell was bound to be on a rampage when he found out they were missing. While that in itself would be amusing, Harry wasn't eager for another hour cleaning the front hall as punishment.

Together they made their way toward the first floor, stepping lightly, and keeping to the shadows outside the flickering light bulbs. Everything was going according to plan, and Harry should have known better than to grow careless. They had nearly reached the stairs when it happened.

They were passing through the final hallway, which would lead to the main staircase as soon as they turned right. The corridor was dark with two dim lights glowing at either end. As they crossed into the shadows, both were barely visible to each other.

Taking a step forward, Harry paused at an unexpected creak that he was certain didn't come from him. Caught off guard, Blaise bumped into him, the weight of her pack caused her to tip over.

"Harry, what-" She glared ineffectively when he slapped a hand over her mouth. Even so, he felt her mouth tighten stubbornly, and raised a finger to his lips silently. Catching his drift, she went still and listened. A moment later, neither could ignore the groaning yawn from the end of the hall.

Cursing his luck, Harry ran a panicked eye over their surroundings. Whoever it was, would stumble onto them if they stayed still. Going back would only cause them to be caught under the lights when the unknown person came forward. Other than that, there was really nowhere else to go... unless...

Biting his lip, Harry looked indecisively at the single window on the left wall. He knew it looked down on the back of the orphanage. A paved driveway cut through the courtyard for the delivery truck and the trash pickup.

Harry caught Blaise's eyes, gesturing with his own. She blinked rapidly before returning her gaze to him, clearing stating without words, 'No effing way.'

The decision was taken from her when they heard the creaky footsteps pause and change to those of someone no longer hampered by stairs. Hauling Blaise off the carpet by her sleeve, Harry moved toward the wall, sliding open the window as quietly as possible. A cool night breeze ruffled his hair as he pulled himself onto the ledge outside. There was little more than ten inches of concrete to sustain his weight, but Harry didn't let it deter him. Getting Blaise out proved to be more difficult, even with her cooperation, when the bulky backpack got caught on the window frame. With a sharp tug, he pulled her through, just in time as he saw a wide silhouette stretching across the floor where they'd stood just minutes ago.

"Blaise," Harry hissed. They had to move now, or the figure would certainly not miss the two children perched outside like overgrown pigeons.

"Hang on to the ledge," he instructed, simultaneously lowering himself. He gripped the wall with his fingertips, stretching the rest of his body as far as he could.

"Harry, are you mad?" Blaise had pressed herself against the building, eyeing the ground below with no small amount of fear, "That's a twenty-foot drop!"

"Just hang onto the window, and aim for the dumpster," he said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"But the stairs are so close..." she whined. When Harry just stared at her, Blaise grumbled, glancing between the ground and the looming figure. Neither held much appeal. Moaning, she lowered herself, matching Harry's position.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Shh! Look!"

Blaise whipped her head up, not loosening her hold one bit as the stranger was finally revealed. That became nearly impossible when she let out a gasp at the sight of their half-asleep caretaker.

Cromwell was dressed in a snug cotton robe, complete with fuzzy slippers, but that wasn't all. Oh, no, what caused Blaise to turn a deep red with suppressed giggles was the thick green paste smeared across his face, and the hot pink curlers tangled in what was left of his hair. He carried a rolled copy of the paper in his hand as he shuffled along, suggesting he was on his way to the bathroom.

Harry was already preparing to fall, grimacing at the permanently ingrained image of Cromwell even as he let go of the ledge. With a quiet thump, he landed in a crouch on one of the closed lids.

Approximately twenty feet above him, Blaise was clenching her teeth, a snort escaping despite her best efforts. Cromwell started at the small noise, and Blaise couldn't hold back when his open robe revealed pink-hearted boxers. She howled in fright when her fingers slipped and she went plummeting into the open side of the dumpster.

Back in the hallway, Cromwell frowned, looking out the dark window for the source of the commotion. Hearing a scuffle in the garbage and a whimper, he grunted a dismissal, "Damn strays..."

"Blaise, are you alright?" Harry asked, amusement showing in his eyes as he took in her disgruntled expression.

"Just bloody perfect," she scowled as she removed a banana peel from her shoulder.

"C'mon," Harry held out a hand, concentrating on keeping a straight face.

Just as Blaise reached up to grab it, she gave a sudden yelp, falling back in, "Aaah! Harry, there's something- EEK!" Shaking her jacket off, she squealed when something wiggled out.

"Sneak!" Harry gasped when the obsidian snake fell out of his friend's clothing and into an empty box of biscuits, hissing indignantly.

Harry checked on Blaise to see her rather preoccupied as she crawled out, sighing in relief once her shoes were on the marginally cleaner ground. She wiped her hands on her jeans, shuddering in disgust.

Looking back into the garbage, Harry watched Sneak slither out of the old box, and allowed him to wrap around his outstretched arm. Lowering his voice, he asked, "*Sneak, where you been?*"

"Oh, I've been on vacation in Majorca. Lovely weather this time of year... Where do you think I've been!" the irate little snake hissed, *"I've been trapped in here for days!"*

Harry blushed, 'I knew I forgot something...' Listening to the snake, Harry sighed. Sneak really was spending too much time around Blaise. Her sarcasm was beginning to rub off.

"I'm sorry. I had no idea what happened to you after Cromwell dragged me off," Harry apologized. He could only imagine how awful it must have been, stuck in a garbage bin for nearly a week.

"Well, it wasn't too bad. I found plenty of juicy rats..."

Okay...

"C'mon," he shouldered his backpack, and dropped back onto the ground.

"Hey- What's going on?" Sneak seemed reluctant to leave his rodent buffet, no matter how bad it smelled.

"We're getting out of here-"

"Finally, I thought you guys would have ditched this place ages ago!"

Harry sighed in exasperation before zipping the protesting snake back into his bag. He gestured to Blaise, briefly shaking his head at her questioning look, before moving on. He would have to explain things to her eventually. If this... *magic* thing was real, then he had hope that there might be a reasonable explanation for his conversations with Sneak.

Together they walked toward the tall metal fence that ran the perimeter of the property. Pulling out the keys, he unlocked the gate. Taking a deep breathe he looked at the entire world ahead of him. It wasn't much to look at really, between the deserted streets and derelict buildings. Harry exhaled as he thought of what awaited him and his friends. If this wasn't just a dream, then it seemed his relatives were wrong all those years ago... Either way, Harry knew he would be getting answers soon...

"Harry!"

Harry groaned in annoyance and attempted to roll over, but instead he encountered a metal wall.

"Oomph!"

Harry sat up, blinking tiredly, only to find himself watching the streets of London flash by the window. It had been at least two hours since they left the orphanage. He and Blaise had managed to find a bus stop, only to wait another twenty minutes for the double-decker to pull up. The bus driver had seemed suspicious of his first customers being two children wearing all black and carrying heavy knapsacks. Blaise's commando makeup didn't help either, but after Harry deposited the correct bus fare, he shrugged and closed the door.

At some point during the quiet ride, Harry must have fallen asleep. He could still recall the remnants of the dream he'd had since before the orphanage, during those lonely nights in the cupboard. There was screaming... a painfully bright green light... high, cold laughter...

"Finally!"

Harry started out of his thoughts and turned to his friend who looked just as exhausted as he felt. Her arms were crossed, and she looked short of patience. He supposed she must have been trying to get him up for a while. Unfortunately, once Harry started dreaming, not even Cromwell's screams of outrage at the previous night's prank could wake him.

"What's... going on?" Harry yawned, still half asleep.

"We're here," she pointed out the window. Harry could just make out a shabby pub squeezed between a bookshop and a music store. If he hadn't been looking for it, he doubted he'd have even noticed the plain brick building. It said *The Leaky Cauldron* in faded letters above the door. He and Blaise grabbed their stuff and hopped off the bus before the driver got impatient.

"This," Blaise said in a dry voice, "is where we buy our school supplies?" She looked over the dusty lot with no small amount of

distaste. A group of people walked past the two children, not even sparing a glance at the pub.

"Well," Harry replied, trying to keep a straight face, "don't forget, it is a *magical* school."

"Ah, and I suppose the bar tender will sell us a couple potions? Do you think we'll need proof of ID?" she answered, matching his serious tone.

"Oh, come on," Harry grabbed Blaise's wrist and dragged her forward. They pushed open the door, almost expecting a room full of witches and wizards. They were sorely disappointed. The bar was still empty except for a few early risers eating breakfast in the booths. An old man walked around wiping tables and collecting empty glasses. His eyes flickered over them as they entered before returning to his task.

"Wow," Blaise said tightly, turning to Harry, "We got up at four in the morning, escaped St. Margaret's, took a bus all the way through London... All this, to get a couple of drinks," she finished, glaring at him.

Harry sighed, she was right. That whole thing must have been a hoax, and Harry fell right for it. He should have known it couldn't be real. But... there were so many things... incidents at the orphanage, talking to Sneak... he could almost believe it was true...

"I'm sorry, Blaise," Harry looked down at the floor, too afraid to see the disappointment in his friend's eyes, "I don't know what we should do now, Cromwell is going to figure out we're missing, if someone hasn't already told him... I guess we'll just have to..." Harry trailed off. Blaise wasn't even paying attention to him. In fact, she seemed to be staring at something over his shoulder. Her mouth moved silently, as she blinked incomprehensibly.

"Hello? Blaise?" he waved a hand in front of her, but she continued to stare straight ahead, "What-"

Harry turned around, just in time to see a bright flash come from the fireplace, and a red-haired boy fly out. He straightened, calmly brushing the soot of his shirt, and stood to the side. Harry and Blaise

watched, gaping at the boy who didn't seem to notice their crazed stares as he adjusted his glasses. Just as Harry was ready to blame the hallucination on lack of sleep, the fire flared bright green once more, and a pair of twins stumbled out, joining who must have been there brother. The process repeated with several others appearing, all having bright red hair and freckles. There was a younger boy who seemed to be the same age as Harry and Blaise. He looked sulky as a short, plump woman fussed over him. The twins snickered at their brother's expense, and a small girl behind them giggled. The family chattered noisily as they moved out the back of the pub and into an alley.

Harry looked over at his best friend, and a silent agreement seemed to pass through them, *'Follow them!'*

They hurried after the family, all under the calculating gaze of the old bartender, who continued to polish the same table mechanically.

He figured they must be muggleborns. No one else would be so surprised at the Weasley family's entrance, unless it was at how many children they had. And they couldn't be muggles, otherwise they wouldn't have even seen the pub. As the two passed, he caught a glimpse of emerald eyes and a lightning bolt-shaped scar. His rag froze in its cleaning.

'Could it be...? Harry Potter?'

"Harry, wait up!" Blaise called as her friend slipped outside.

They found the family standing at a dead end. They seemed to be looking rather intently at the brick wall.

"What are they waiting for?" Blaise and Harry watched as the woman pulled out a long stick. She seemed to be muttering to herself as she tapped the bricks.

Suddenly, a hole melted in the center of the wall, revealing an entire village, bustling with people behind it. Harry just managed to slap a hand over Blaise's muffled gasp. Before she could tell him off, he

sprinted toward the hole. It was beginning to close up again. Seeing this, Blaise hurried to catch up.

Harry and Blaise had just set foot on the cobbled street when the portal closed. Turning back, they could find no sign of it ever being there.

"Well, looks like there's no going back," Blaise gulped.

"You'd actually want to?" Harry raised an eyebrow at his friend.

"Good point."

"Come along, children! Percy, can you keep an eye on Ginny? Ron, come on! Fred, George, don't you dare let me catch you sneaking off to Knockturn Alley again!"

As she said this, the woman glared at the twins sternly. They gave identical looks of innocence, which looked completely fake to Harry and Blaise, who were well practiced in the art of deception.

"Don't worry, mum! We're just gonna stop in Gamble and Japes-"

"Don't you dare use anything you buy in there on your poor brother! You'll be deknoming the garden for a week if I've find out you've turned him blue again!"

"Aww, mum, we'd never hurt ickle Ronniekinns-"

There was an outcry of, "Hey!" from their brother.

"Besides, we're saving them for Filch-" he whispered aside to his twin.

"Fred, I heard that!"

"Oy, I'm George! Honestly, woman, and you call yourself our mother?"

"So sorry, dear," she apologized, flushing.

"Just kidding, mum, I am Fred. See you later!" Before she could reprimand them, the two twins took off down the street. The last Harry saw of them, they were ducking into a shop, but not before eyeing a dark street exiting Diagon Alley. They kept checking to see if their mother was watching, which, unfortunately for them, she was.

"Those two," she huffed, "Percy, please try to dissuade them from blowing up another toilet seat this year," she looked imploringly at the eldest boy.

"Of course, mother," he said, puffing out his chest, where a shiny silver badge was pinned to his shirt.

Soon the family left, and Harry and Blaise deemed it safe to follow. They looked in awe at some of the items for sale. Who would have thought all this could be found in London?

"Wow! Look, Blaise, is that a cauldron?"

"Yeah, and check out what they're wearing! That one's got a witch's hat!"

"That's nothing, that guy's wearing a dress!"

"I wonder what's with all the owls?" Blaise gestured toward a place called Eeyelop's Owl Emporium. Hundreds of eyes stared unblinkingly from the front window. Harry walked closer, and was caught by one particular amber gaze. A brilliant white owl was watching his every move. She seemed a lot calmer than the other birds, especially the little owl that was currently buzzing around the store. It would ram the glass every now and then with a dull thump.

"Harry!" he was distracted from the owl by Blaise as she eagerly tugged him across the street.

"Whoa," they had just entered something like a sports store. It was filled with the usual gear, including a few posters. However, what made it so different was the lack of playing balls. Instead, broomsticks were set on displays around the walls. A man stood in the middle of a crowd, showing off the newest model. It was amazing;

every twig perfectly aligned, the mahogany handle flawless. Harry could almost see himself riding one...

Blaise had to practically drag Harry away from it, "Boys and sports," she muttered as they left.

Harry moved to follow her outside, and found the exit blocked. Blaise was sitting on the floor next to another boy. His silver hair was ruffled and his cheeks flushed. She'd apparently knocked into him opening the door. She got up, brushing off her jeans.

"Sorry about that," Blaise offered a hand to help him up.

The boy looked at her with disgust in his blue eyes, "Why don't you watch where you're going, mudblood!" he sneered.

Blaise looked taken aback, but Harry pushed forward, his emerald eyes narrowed in warning.

"Hey, my friend said she's sorry. There's no reason to insult her."

"Don't tell me what I should do! Do you have any idea who I am who I am?"

"No," Harry answered in dismissal, "and I couldn't care less."

The boy eyes glinted angrily and he opened his mouth to retort.

He didn't get the chance. While the boy had been talking, Harry struggled to hold himself back from outright hitting him. Meanwhile, he didn't notice the movement of something creeping out of his bag. Before either boy knew what happened, Sneak was coiling up the boy's leg.

A high-pitched scream interrupted the quiet street. People paused in their shopping to stare at the strange sight. A well-known, but not well-liked, boy was wrestling with a snake, while two other children stood nearby.

Harry watched, unsure of what to do. He had completely forgotten about Sneak, *'Should I help the guy out?'* he wondered as the boy panicked, *'Nah.'*

"Harry!"

"Huh?" he turned away from the show to see Blaise fidgeting uncomfortably.

"Come on!" Blaise pulled him away from the commotion, "Harry, we should get out of here..."

Blaise was right. They were already drawing a crowd. It wouldn't be wise to attract too much attention, especially as they had run away. Both took off down the street, leaving Sneak to deal with the boy. After all, he could take care of himself.

They had almost made it back to the brick wall, when Harry was seized by two arms. They proceeded to yank him into an empty store. Most of the customers had gone to see the commotion.

"Hmph! Whut er oo ooing!" Harry struggled to say through the hand covering his mouth. He heard muffled laughter, interrupted by a thump and a weak groan. His attacker let go, and Harry turned around. He found a very pissed off Blaise standing over the two red-haired twins they'd followed into Diagon Alley. Both looked rather nervous in front of the small girl. Harry could sympathize. Blaise was downright scary when she wanted to be.

"Now, what did you two think you were doing?" Blaise glared at them.

"Hey, mate! Relax, it was just a joke-"

The one on the left was cut off by Blaise's very realistic growl.

"What my dear brother meant to say," The one on the right jumped in, "is that we wanted to congratulate you-"

"Yeah," his brother added, "We saw you deal with that rich ponce, Malfoy! It was-"

"Bloody brilliant!" they finished together.

Harry was getting a headache from constantly switching his attention from one twin to the other, "Er, well, thanks."

"Oy! Are you starting at Hogwarts this year?"

"Yes," Blaise chimed in, finally calming down at the mention of the magical school.

"Well, I'm Fred Weasley-"

"And I'm George-"

"It's been a pleasure to meet the next generation of mischief makers-"

"We should talk pranks-"

"See you on the train!" With that, the Weasley twins exited the store, trying and failing to look as though they were not fleeing from Blaise.

"That was... interesting," Blaise remarked as she watched them leave.

"Blaise," Harry looked at her, the wheels in his head already turning, "I believe we have some competition this year..."

Blaise grinned back, her eyes sparkling.

As they wandered in the direction of The Leaky Cauldron, Harry and Blaise tried to avoid most of the wizards and witches bustling along the street. Harry also kept an eye out for Sneak. He hoped the snake would have the sense to stay out of trouble. Of course, Harry should have known better.

They were skirting around the broom store when they saw the blonde boy with an older version of himself. Sneak was still curled around his leg, now trying to avoid the man as he focused his stick on the snake. In between frustrated curses, he was muttering words in another language every now and then. His aim finally proved true when red

sparks zapped the snake, and an invisible force flung him off, flying over the heads of the crowd.

Before Blaise could stop him, Harry dove forward, knocking over an elderly couple in the process, and caught the black reptile.

"*Sneak, are you alright?*" he whispered from the ground, careful not to let anyone hear.

"*Ow! That wanker singed my scales!*" he hissed pathetically.

Harry rolled his eyes as he stood up, still cradling the snake. Now that the situation was under control, most of the crowd began to disperse. That is, except for the two wizards still scowling at Harry.

"Sorry about that," Harry apologized to the man, suppressing the urge to snort at the look on the boy's face. His once-perfect blonde hair was starting to resemble Harry's own mess, and his cheeks were flushed in embarrassment.

The elder didn't look much better. His icy blue eyes narrowed calculatingly while he pasted on a fake smile.

"No trouble at all. I'm sure this was all just a misunderstanding, Mr. Potter..." He seemed to be staring intently at Harry's forehead, precisely where his scar was located. Harry was watching him, and missed when the boy's eyes widened, his pallor darkening considerably.

"How do you know my name? Have we met before?" Harry asked warily.

"Oh, pardon me. I am Lucius Malfoy, and I believe you've already been introduced to my son, Draco."

That he had evaded the question didn't escape Harry's notice.

"Right," Harry turned to leave, "Well, we should be going..."

"Of course, I'm sure your relatives must be worried," Harry flinched at the mention of the Dursleys.

He *really* didn't trust this guy, and his scar was starting to itch...

Suddenly, a pale hand landed on Harry's shoulder, startling him. He heard Blaise squeak in surprise.

"Lucius," a tall, menacing-looking man came into view. He had long, greasy black hair, and wore a black cloak. He noticed Harry's curious gaze, and looked down. Green eyes met two dark endless tunnels, he was falling in...

"Severus," the man broke eye contact, and Harry shook his head, "what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be preparing for the students' arrival?" Mr. Malfoy didn't seem happy too see him.

"I'm afraid I was low on hellebore, those Weasley twins have been raiding my stores again," he scowled while Blaise cracked a grin behind his back. Draco saw and glared at her. Blaise just smiled back cheekily, "I decided to stop at the Apothecary. Tell me, Lucius, I never expected to find you keeping company with a Potter," he sneered.

"Not that it's any of your business, he and my son just had a disagreement," Snape's dark eyes instantly took in the irritated Draco and the black coils in Harry's arms.

"Really," an eyebrow twitched upward, but other than that, his expression remained impassive, "Well, I'll have to cut your little chat short. The headmaster will want to ensure that Mr. Potter," he looked back at Blaise, "and Miss Zabini get to Hogwarts safely."

Harry looked at him in surprise. He was certainly not the type of person you'd expect to find at a school. Maybe the creepy outfit was just for show. After all, he could much friendlier once you got know him. Maybe he'd even explain some of the magical world to Harry and Blaise. Like why everyone was wearing a dress...

Halting Harry's train of thought, he felt the man grab hold of his arm and pull Blaise over. Before they could figure out what was happening, Harry felt a strange, sucking sensation. It felt like he was being pulled in a million directions. It wasn't painful, but it left an

unpleasant tingle spreading throughout his very bones. A second later, everything went dark and they vanished.

Harry's vision blacked out for a moment, leaving him in total darkness as to what was happening. Soon the light returned with a vengeance, leaving him blinking stupidly in the middle of... *'Wait, where am I?'*

Harry looked around and spotted a pair of tall iron gates. A closer look revealed a coat of arms inscribed in the center. They looked vaguely familiar. There was a lion, snake, eagle, and badger, all surrounding a fancy 'H'... *'It's the same as the wax seal on my letter!'* Harry realized, *'But that means, this must be... Hogwarts!'*

Harry looked around eagerly for any sign of the school. Unfortunately, all he could see was trees in each direction, though if he looked behind him, he could faintly spot a village.

When he looked back to Blaise and the man, Harry was taken aback to see him already walking through the now-open gates. He was moving at a fast pace, almost impatiently, and didn't spare a glance at the two children. Harry turned to Blaise and saw her just as baffled. With a shrug, he ran to catch up, Blaise right behind.

"Um, excuse me?" Harry panted as he hurried to catch up to the cloaked figure. If the man heard, he gave no sign.

Harry huffed angrily, "Hey! Are you gonna tell us what's going on or what?"

That got his attention. He froze in place and slowly turned to loom over the boy. If Harry wasn't so annoyed, he might have noticed the disturbing glint in his eyes. Meanwhile, Blaise, who'd been studying the man, realized too late that he wasn't someone to mess with. Of course, Harry was too stubborn to realize that.

"You want to know what is going on, Potter?"

Harry silently gulped as, in a few quick strides, the man towered over him. He nodded carefully.

"Fine, I am Professor Snape, your new Potions teacher, and if you were any less of a dunderhead, you would have noticed that I am

taking you to Hogwarts. I can already see you will be hopeless in my class."

Harry blushed at the insult. If Snape thought Harry was one to just stand there and take it, then he was sorely mistaken, "Yeah, well with you as my teacher, I can see I won't be the only student that doesn't learn anything."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he looked down at Harry. Blaise stood behind him, gesturing frantically at Harry to shut up. Harry continued to ignore her.

"Listen here, you insufferable brat, I have better things to do than baby-sit, so why don't you and your little girlfriend be silent, and come with me so we can get this over with," he sneered.

With that last comment, Blaise threw all discretion out the window, "Hey! Who do you think you are? You aren't our guardian, and you can't just kidnap us and drag us to some magic school without answering any questions!" Now Harry was the one shaking his head in exasperation, "For example, what the bloody hell is going on? We just found those stupid letters a few days ago! I thought this was all a joke! Are you telling me you can really do magic tricks?"

Snape's mouth curved into a feral smile, "Well, if you two don't control yourselves, I may just show you what magic is really capable of..."

Blaise's mouth snapped shut and her eyes widened. Snape just leered and continued walking. Harry and Blaise followed while glaring at the back of his billowing cloak. If looks could kill, Snape's robes would already be on fire.

'Too bad I can't use magic yet...' Harry thought regretfully. But that would change soon enough... He could already see their first victim... Once school started, Snape was going down.

"Whoa," Both Blaise and Harry were stunned when they caught sight of Hogwarts. They had been trekking up the lawn in silence for ten minutes, dutifully ignoring Snape except to send him the occasional glare. They had already seen an enormous lake and the forest that

surrounded everything. It prevented them from seeing anything outside the grounds as it stood like a dark sentry, creaking eerily in the wind. They could already see the magnificent castle up ahead, but on the way, they passed a wooden cabin near the forest, and some greenhouses. To the far left, Harry saw some kind of sports field and grinned eagerly as he remembered the flying brooms in Diagon Alley. He was momentarily confused when he spotted several towering poles with circles on the top sticking out of the grass.

Hogwarts looked like something out of a fairy tale. It was a gigantic stone building with hundreds of windows and turrets. Harry actually considered risking his health to ask their guide if there was a moat. Both children would have spent all night staring open-mouthed at the front door if Snape hadn't barked at them to keep up.

If they thought the outside was cool, it was just the beginning. The inside was amazing. It gave off a spooky, medieval feel, of course Snape's dark presence only enhanced that, but at the same time it looked like it was built for royalty.

There were endless marble staircases, tall, wooden doors, and torches lighting up the halls. More paintings than Harry could count adorned the walls.

"They're so lifelike!" Blaise whispered to her friend, "It's almost like you can feel them all staring at you... kinda creepy!"

"What are you looking at?" a portrait of a woman in a frilly dress snapped at her.

"Eep!" Blaise squeaked and took off after Snape, Harry right behind her.

That was certainly unexpected. Now that he noticed, all of the paintings moved if you were paying attention. Harry scowled in thought. How was he ever going to get away with a prank with all those eyes watching his every move? Well, he'd figure that detail out later. Maybe a few paintings could be persuaded to keep quiet... If not, he could always introduce them to a little permanent marker. After all, Cromwell just *loved* the glasses and mustache they added to his self-portrait in the front hall...

They finally came to a stop at a pair of stone gargoyles. Harry looked around in confusion. The hall was completely silent as Snape scowled at the statue. He seemed to fight some inner battle before muttering, "Gummi Bears."

Harry stared at the man and wondered if he was finally showing signs of insanity, or if he had a major sugar craving. Fortunately, before Harry could further contemplate that, the gargoyles came to life.

"What do you want?" The statue on the left asked, rather bravely, in Harry's opinion.

"I need to speak to the headmaster, it's urgent."

"Ooohhh, urgent he says," The one on the right spoke up in a drawling voice, "Professor Dumbledore's awfully busy, 'ya know. People can't just barge in at all hours expecting to see him."

Snape was literally fuming, "Don't give me that, you worthless piece of rock! I command you to open this instant!" he growled, whipping out his wand. The gargoyles continued to mock him, much to Blaise and Harry's amusement. He looked about ready to incinerate them with magic, when a voice interrupted.

"Hello, Severus. Is there something I can help you with?"

The oldest person Harry had ever seen stepped out of the shadows. He was wearing one of those wizard dresses, and he had a long silver beard tucked into his belt. Blue eyes twinkled behind half-moon glasses as he took in the sight of his colleague, wand still pointed at the statues, which were whistling innocently. Meanwhile, two children stood behind the menacing professor, snickering quietly behind their hands.

"Yes, you can help me by taking these two so I can go finish my lesson plans before those *children* come back for another year!" Snape snarled, clearly at the end of his patience.

"Oh, and who might they be?" Dumbledore peered at them with interest, "I've never known you to show favor to any students other than your Slytherins."

"For your information, they are Zabini and *Potter*," he sneered while pointing at the bewildered kids.

"Ah," Dumbledore's twinkle seemed to increase tenfold, "Mr. Potter, Miss Zabini, why don't you two come up to my office for a chat?" With a nod of his head, the two gargoyles saluted the headmaster and slid aside, revealing a winding staircase leading up.

"Thank you so much, Severus! Farewell!" With that, he gestured to Blaise and Harry before climbing the stairs. As the moving stairs ascended, Harry heard Snape's fading voice grumble about barmy old codgers.

"Please, come in, take a seat," Dumbledore smiled warmly as he sat down behind the mahogany desk. His office was the perfect example of what one would expect from the magical headmaster. Dozens of silver instruments sat on the shelves, whirring and vibrating, one even purred. The room gave off a feeling of calm, instead of the usual tension from being around authority, or in the duo's case, the itch to cause mayhem. Harry liked Dumbledore's office.

"Lemon drop?" he offered as he pulled an overflowing bowl of sweets from out of nowhere.

Blaise squealed in delight and reached into the bowl.

Correction, Harry *really* liked Dumbledore's office.

Harry watched awkwardly as Blaise dug into the headmaster's candy dish, "Er, Blaise, maybe you should..." he trailed off when Dumbledore followed Blaise's example and polished off several yellow candies, "Um, never mind, I'll just be over here..."

Harry slowly backed away from the ever-growing pile of colored wrappers. He came to a halt when he heard a light twittering. He turned and came face to face with a flaming red swan.

"Uh, hi," he said nervously. Harry wasn't too fond of birds. He'd had a bad experience with some angry pigeons and a prank gone wrong when he was eight...

The bird trilled reassuringly and Harry felt a warm, safe feeling spread throughout him. He smiled and stroked the bird while watching his two companions empty the bowl. Harry could have sworn he heard the bird snort.

"How did you two come upon Professor Snape?"

Harry was startled when Dumbledore spoke. Then he noticed the empty bowl resting on the desk.

"Um, well, you see, we got these letters..."

"Yeah," Blaise added, "It said we were excepted to a school for magic! I still can't believe it's real! This is so cool!"

Harry took over for his sugar-hyper friend, "We wanted to see if it was true, so we went to that place, um, Diagon Alley. Then, er..." Harry trailed off uncomfortably. He wasn't sure what to say. After all, he couldn't exactly tell the headmaster he'd been fighting already.

"Do not worry yourself, Harry. I'm sure you didn't cause too much trouble," Dumbledore's beard twitched. Somehow, Harry was sure he knew more than he was telling...

"I must say, I'm quite glad you ran into Severus. We were having some trouble locating you, Harry," Harry's head snapped up at this, "We originally sent your letter to the Dursley residence," Harry's expression darkened visibly, and Dumbledore seemed to lose his twinkle.

Blaise frowned as she watched the exchange. Harry had once broken down and told her about his relatives before the orphanage, but after that, he avoided the subject all together. She remembered hearing how they treated him and was appalled! She was younger than Harry when she went to St. Margaret's, and barely remembered her parents, though she was pretty sure they'd died. But she could never

understand how someone could treat a child that way, and then abandon their own flesh and blood!

"I truly regret never checking on you after leaving you in their care, Harry," Dumbledore reached out a wrinkled hand as if to comfort him, but pulled back at the last second.

Blaise grew worried when her friend paled, and his hands began to shake.

"You- you're the one that left me with those... *people*?" Harry growled, and Blaise almost thought she saw his eyes *glow* with fury.

"Please, calm down, and give me a chance to explain..." Dumbledore aimed a questioning glance toward the other occupant of the room.

Harry noticed this and replied through clenched teeth, "Blaise is my best friend, she can hear whatever you have to say," Blaise smiled gratefully at that, and Harry acknowledged her with a nod.

"Very well," he let out a tired sigh, "Do you know how your parents died, Harry?" he asked gently.

"What?" Harry wasn't expecting that, "Of course, they were in a car accident..." he trailed off when Dumbledore's blue eyes hardened, "Weren't they?"

"Your mother and father were murdered, by a dark wizard named Lord Voldemort," Harry gasped, and Blaise placed a trembling hand on his shoulder in support.

"Ten years ago," he continued, "Voldemort was taking over. He and his followers were prejudiced against all non-magic people, muggles. They believed that muggles were inferior, and anyone related to them had dirty blood," the old man shook his head in disgust.

"Hundreds were tortured and killed back then. While many wizards joined Voldemort's cause, there were still those who opposed him. I myself, called together such people to aid in the war. We were called the Order of the Phoenix," the bird in the corner stretched its long neck and sang proudly at the name.

Dumbledore smiled sadly and continued, "Your parents were part of that group," Harry's eyes widened, "They were wonderful people, the Potters, and believed all humans were equal. Your mother was, in fact, a muggleborn, born into a family with no previous signs of magic.

"One day, I received news from one of my spies in Voldemort's inner circle that the Potters were targets. I contacted them immediately, and they went into hiding. But it wasn't enough, they were discovered in the end," Harry's blood ran cold. He could already see where this was heading...

"On October 31st, Voldemort broke into your home. He killed your father, and went to kill you. Your mother refused to move, and he killed her as well. Then he aimed the fatal curse at you, but at the last moment, it rebounded off of you and onto him, leaving you with no more than a scar, while Voldemort was ripped from his body."

There was a ringing silence in the office as Harry reached up to touch the familiar lightning bolt scar. Blaise sat stiffly in her seat, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Wh-what happened?" Harry croaked.

"Voldemort disappeared, and hasn't been seen since. The wizarding world still celebrates to this day. You are a hero to them, Harry, the Boy Who Lived."

Harry gaped at this revelation, "Me, a hero? But I was only a baby! I didn't do anything!"

"It's true. When the students come, anyone that grew up in a magical home will know your name. In fact, I believe you're in quite a few of the history books as well. When I left you at Privet Drive, I was also hoping to hide you from the press. At the moment, you're an enigma to them, and you're quite fortunate no one knew you were in Diagon Alley today."

Harry gulped when he thought of the scene Sneak had caused... Where was he any way? Oh, well, he'd turn up eventually...

"Hmm, you'd think the savior of the wizarding world would be taller..." Blaise quipped in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Harry mock-glared at her, but it was only half-hearted. Blaise just stuck her tongue out childishly. He smiled sadly at his best friend for trying to cheer him up.

The headmaster twinkled at the two friends from his desk, and cleared his throat to get their attention, "Eh-hem."

Both Harry and Blaise looked up at the headmaster, although the light in Harry's eyes was noticeably dimmer.

"You both might as well stay at Hogwarts until the term starts. The others students will be arriving in a few days. Binky!" he called out and tiny green creature in a tea towel appeared in a puff of smoke, startling Blaise so much that she fell right out of her chair. Harry snorted but gave her a hand up.

"How can Binky help Master Dumbles?" The creature asked in a high-pitched voice while it bowed low to the floor.

"Please show Mr. Potter and Miss Zabini to a spare room in the guest wing."

Binky nodded eagerly and beckoned the two children.

"Feel free to explore the castle, but please stay on school grounds. Oh, and Harry?" Dumbledore stopped the boy as he was following Blaise out the door, "Keep an eye out for the caretaker, Mr. Filch. He prowls the halls, looking for students up to no good," he winked at Harry before shuffling through a drawer.

Harry was just closing the door, when he heard Dumbledore muttering to himself, "Now where did my stash of cockroach clusters go? Fawkes, did you eat them all again?"

An innocent chirp was his only response. Harry laughed quietly, and hurried to catch up with Blaise and Binky. He could already tell Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was going to be an interesting experience...

"These is your rooms, Mr. Potter, Miss Zabini," Binky squeaked out as she stopped in front of a large painting depicting a knight on his horse.

"Halt!" The man in the painting struggled to climb off his horse, and only succeeded in tumbling off in the bulky armor, his helmet clinking shut. He pushed it back open and sat up, "Who goes there? Announce thy intentions or prepare to meet with the blade of my sword!" He attempted to lift the heavy iron sword from its scabbard, pausing from his rant to take a breath.

Binky seemed used to such behavior and paid him no heed. Instead, she snapped her fingers, causing the portrait to swing open, revealing a dark doorway. Blaise and Harry followed her inside, ignoring the paintings indignant calls.

"Come back ye lily-livered cowards-" the portal closed, cutting off his shouts, and with another snap of their guide's finger, torches flared to life giving them a clear view of their surroundings.

Blaise whistled in appreciation, and Harry had to agree. The rooms they were staying in were luxurious. Solid oak furniture was scattered about, including a couch with velvet cushions. A window on the far wall showed a spectacular view of the lake and forest. For two children who had grown up in an orphanage that barely met code regulations, the splendor was almost too much...

"I call this room!" Blaise yelled, charging into the door on the left possessively, "Oooh! It's got a canopy bed!"

Well, almost too much.

Harry started toward the room on the right. Peeking inside, he discovered a queen-size bed with scarlet hangings. The bedspread had a gold lion embedded in it, and Harry noticed its tail actually twitch under his gaze. An oak desk stood in the corner next to another wall, near a window. Harry pulled apart the red and gold curtains to see the sun halfway through the sky. He guessed it to be a little past two by now.

Harry walked back into the main room and found Blaise asking Binky about the school.

"How big is this place?"

"Well, Binky is not sure... it depends on how Hogwarts is feeling at the moment. It is always changing the rooms," she replied, head cocked to the side in thought.

Blaise blanched and started muttering about needing a map just to find the bathroom. She looked up at the sound of Harry's footsteps, "Isn't this place bloody brilliant?"

"Yeah, it's certainly not what I'd expect in a boarding school. The colors are a little bright though," he waved a hand at the golden couch and scarlet pillows.

Blaise wrinkled her nose at the gaudy color scheme, "Maybe they're the school colors or something. Ick, I hope not, there is no way I'm gonna walk to classes dressed in anything like that-"

"Excuse me, sir," Binky tugged on Harry's shirt to get his attention, "I has to be going now. Dinner is to be served in the Great Hall at six. Binky has to go back and help in the kitchens."

"No problem, Binky," Harry nodded kindly, "Thank you for showing us to our rooms."

Binky practically glowed with pleasure before she bowed and vanished in another puff of smoke.

After the elf's departure, Blaise flopped down onto the couch, closing her eyes in content, "Wow. I still can't believe all this is real, eh, Harry?"

When no answer came, she opened her eyes, frowning. Harry stood against the wall, arms crossed, and apparently deep in thought.

"Harry? Are you alright?" Blaise asked, sitting up in concern.

His head snapped up, the emerald eyes behind his glasses slightly empty.

"What- Oh, yeah, I'm fine," he replied, sounding distracted.

"If you're sure..."

"Yeah... Blaise, I'll see you in a while, I just need some time to think..."

She watched, unsure of what to say as he walked back into his room, head slightly bowed. The door shut with a click and Blaise leaned back onto the cushions. She sighed into the silence, "Oh, Harry..."

He stared at the ceiling pensively, going over the events of that day. He'd escaped St. Margaret's, maybe for good, discovered that magic was real, arrived at a school for wizards, and then the biggest thing of all: He learned the truth of his parents' deaths. A wizard murdered them, Harry as a baby managed to defeat him, and apparently, he was more popular than the Queen of England. It was certainly a lot to take in all at once.

'I still can't believe it... Just last week I was a nobody, an orphan, destined to spend my life under Cromwell's tyranny, until I came of age and he threw me out. That, or he'd finally convince child services to send me to St. Brutus's.'

Cromwell had actually filed complaints when he discovered Harry was the cause of all his problems. A representative came to meet Harry before carting him off to the school for the criminally insane. Twenty minutes later, the woman could be heard ranting in Cromwell's office about how he should be ashamed of himself for making up stories about such a sweet little boy, followed by her announcement that he was on probation.

Harry smiled weakly at the memory before the present situation came rushing back, *'It doesn't make any sense. How can I have defeated the most evil wizard of all time? What did I do, drool on him?'* Harry frowned when he thought about the root of it all... his parents.

'Why didn't anyone tell me? I thought my parents died in a car crash, drunk! Did-did the Dursleys know... about all of this? Did his aunt Petunia lie about her sister's death? But why would she say those things?'

Harry had heard very little about his parents. From what Aunt Petunia said, they were jobless, no good drunks who got themselves killed, and left Harry to burden his relatives. He'd always held onto the hope that what his aunt and uncle said wasn't true, that his mother and father were really wonderful people who cared about him...

When he was younger, Harry had dreamt about them. He would have wonderful dreams about being part of a normal family, surrounded by people happy to see him. When he woke to the sound of his aunt banging on the cupboard, demanding that he begin the endless list of chores for that day, he would take solace in the memory of his mother's voice, comforting him. He would never know if any of those dreams were imagined or perhaps an old memory, faded with time...

Harry screwed up his eyes in anger as he was forced to remember his time with his relatives, before the orphanage. Harry had tried to suppress those memories over time. He never spoke of it to anyone, barely even to Blaise. He may not have gotten along with Cromwell, but in his opinion, St. Margaret's was the best thing that ever happened to him. It had seemed terrifying at first. When he was younger, the threat of an orphanage kept him from disobeying his uncle, and the prospect of the unknown kept him from running away.

At Privet Drive, Harry was never the rebellious person he was now. Back then, he was forced to slave for his aunt and uncle all day long. By the time Harry was four, he'd learned how to accomplish most of his chores, including making breakfast, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, painting the shed, tending to his aunt's flower bed, and washing Uncle Vernon's company car. In return, Harry was given the cramped space under the stairs for a bedroom, his cousin, Dudley's humongous hand-me-downs, and food if he was good.

When it was time for Harry to begin school, he was ecstatic. All he could think about was the chance to get away from the disgusted glares of his family for at least a few hours. Being the naïve child he

was, Harry imagined a bright, cheery school building, warm, caring teachers, and plenty of kids to befriend. Well, he was partially correct. The school was one of the wealthier ones, the teachers were fair, and the other students seemed nice enough... What he didn't count on was the most important factor: Dudley.

His overlarge, bullying cousin scared away any prospective friends, and encouraged people to laugh at Harry's tattered clothes and broken glasses. He pushed Harry through the door into the classroom, stole his neatly written class work in exchange for Dudley's own scribbles, and ate the meager lunch his aunt had given him that morning. Harry practically ran out when the bell rang, signaling recess.

Dudley couldn't keep up with Harry's quick reflexes, thankfully. Harry managed to find a hiding spot before most of the other children came out. He crawled into one of the bright plastic tubes on the jungle gym.

His peace didn't last for long. With the help of a rat-faced boy, Piers, Dudley managed to track him down...

Flashback:

"Dudley, over here!" Piers shouted triumphantly when he found Harry at the top of the monkey bars. Harry cringed and pressed himself back further into the safety of the tube.

"Hey, Potter! What do you think you're doing? You don't belong here, no one wants you!"

Young Harry didn't have any tears to hold back at the comment. He was all too used to his cousin's taunts. Foolishly, Harry answered him, "Get lost, Dudley! What's the matter? Too scared to come get me yourself, or are you just afraid the whole thing will break under your weight?"

Dudley growled from the ground and started to climb. Harry gulped. He'd hoped Dudley would realize the truth of what he said. Dudley's massive bulk had actually snapped a chair last week. Dudley was either too stubborn to give up or just an idiot. Probably the latter.

Dudley finally made it to the top, out of breath and furious, "Ju-just... wait till I... get my hands on you, Potter! I'm gonna... hit you so hard your parents will feel it! But, maybe not, they are dead after all."

For someone with half the thinking capacity needed to come up with a good insult, Dudley's sure hurt. Something in Harry snapped, and he felt a pressure building behind his eyes. They glowed from inside the tunnel, and Dudley actually whimpered. Before he knew what was happening, an invisible force slammed into him, sending the stunned boy flying backwards off the five-foot drop. He landed heavily on the grass, causing the ground to vibrate. An audible crack reached Harry's ears at the same time, snapping him out of whatever trance he'd been in.

A short time later, the Dursleys were called. They arrived at the school moments later to find their son howling in exaggerated agony in the nurse's office as she tried in vain to hold an icepack to his rapidly swelling ankle.

Meanwhile, Harry sat in the principal's office, dwarfed in a large chair in front of the desk. His short legs swung off the edge nervously. He still didn't know what had happened, but from what the principal had said, Harry was suspended for pushing Dudley off the jungle gym and causing him to break his ankle.

Poor Harry couldn't recall ever touching his cousin, but the principal wouldn't listen to his pleas. Apparently, they had a witness, one Piers Polkiss.

Uncle Vernon rapped on the door and was let in by Principal Wilkins. The two conversed loudly, Vernon yelling about negligent teachers while the principal tried to calm him down. Harry just sat, numbly taking in all in. When Vernon's narrowed gaze set on him, Harry visibly shuddered.

When the car pulled into the driveway, Aunt Petunia helped her sniffling son to the front door. She cooed all sorts of embarrassing names as he moaned pitifully. Harry stayed frozen in the back seat until the car door opened, and Vernon dragged him out roughly by the arm.

"What did you think you were doing, hurting Dudley?" he hissed.

"I-I don't know wh-what happened!" Harry stuttered fearfully.

"Don't lie to me, boy..." he raised a hand threateningly and Harry flinched.

"I swear I didn't touch him! I don't know what happened! He just went flying, like magic!"

That was the last straw for Vernon. Before Harry had a chance to duck, a fist came swinging at his face, knocking him back onto the lawn. He raised a trembling hand to his bruised cheek, and patted the ground behind him for his glasses. They had gone flying off his face.

Vernon leaned down menacingly and bared his teeth at the trembling boy, "THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC!"

Harry spent the next two days locked in his cupboard. They didn't even make him work, which would have been fine if Aunt Petunia hadn't neglected to feed him. Harry couldn't imagine how things had gone from bad to worse so quickly. He was starting to think they had forgotten him when Aunt Petunia opened the cupboard door at the start of the third day. Harry blinked as his eyes adjusted to the light. Before he could ask what was going on, she had dragged him into the kitchen. He sat in the chair nervously as she placed a slice toast and a glass of water in front of him.

"Hurry up and eat, then get dressed," she snapped before walking off.

Harry knew better than to ask questions, so he finished off the meal in record time and changed into one of Dudley's worn out sweaters and even worse jeans.

When Petunia came back with Vernon, they told him to get into the car and started off without any explanations. Harry watched as they drove farther out into the city, towards London. He stared at the front seats, face filled with confusion and more than a little fear. His face still stung from his uncle's blow, and he was sure there was a bruise. The reminder of that day stopped him from questioning their destination.

He soon discovered the purpose of their trip when Vernon pulled up in front of a forbidding-looking building. It was several stories high, with many windows, and a sharp metal fence blocking it from view of the streets on all sides.

With out a word, his aunt and uncle got out and headed inside, Harry following with a desperate look back at the car.

The moment they entered, a short, balding man almost as wide as Vernon greeted them. He had slicked back dark hair and cold gray eyes. His voice had an oily quality and an undercurrent of dislike that Harry was quite familiar with. Harry gulped.

"Well, hello, Mr. and Mrs. Dursley. So glad you could make it."

"Yes, well, is the paperwork all ready?" Vernon shuffled his feet impatiently.

"Of course, I just need you to sign a few things-"

"And that's it? No one will show up at our home to bother us?" Petunia interrupted.

Harry didn't know what they were talking about, but from the sound of it, it wasn't good.

"Hmm, and you must be little Harry," the man leaned down, messing Harry's hair roughly, "I am Mr. Cromwell. Welcome to St. Margaret's Home for Orphaned Children," Harry felt his lungs freeze up, and he had to force himself to keep breathing, "I'm sure you're going to love it here," he finished with a nasty smile.

Harry looked up at his relatives desperately searching for some sign. What he found wasn't pleasing. Vernon was smiling nastily and Petunia looked relieved.

"Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia?" his childish voice cracked, sounding even smaller.

"We should have left you here from the start." With that, Harry's only remaining relatives turned their backs on him and walked out the doors.

When they were gone, Cromwell's smiled disappeared. He turned to the trembling boy and smirked.

"I'm sure you'll enjoy your stay with us," he laughed coldly, "You sleep on the third floor. Now get out of my sight."

He turned and walked into an office, leaving Harry still standing in the hallway.

With growing dread, Harry headed upstairs. He'd never expected the Dursleys to leave him there. Sure, they left a lot to be desired when it came to being a family, but they were his guardians, and they just abandoned him! They'd always told him what a horrible place orphanages were, it was the very threat they used against him. He'd just never believed them capable of it.

Harry reached the top of the first staircase and found himself in an empty hallway with doors on both sides. Just as he was about to proceed, a bell went off, similar to the one he'd heard in school. Suddenly, all the doors opened, and a flood of orphans crowded the hallway. Harry was starting to get claustrophobic when a taller boy knocked into him. Harry fell to the floor, once more losing his glasses. He crawled around, trying to find them without being stepped on. When he reached forward, he found a pair of round spectacles pushed into his hand.

He put them on gratefully and looked up to find a pair of bright blue eyes regarding him curiously. It was a girl about his own age. She had long, reddish-brown hair in a ponytail and was dressed in clothes that weren't much better than his own. She reached out a hand and helped him up.

"Thanks," he muttered shyly.

She smiled warmly, "No problem. You're new here, aren't cha? My name's Blaise. What's yours?"

He smiled back, "Harry. Harry Potter."

End Flashback

Harry grinned remembering his first encounter with Blaise. They'd become best friends after that. She'd been the thing he'd always missed out on in life. A friend. Because of Blaise, Harry grew more confident in himself. He was no longer the weak little boy that everyone picked on... at least not without consequences.

He should probably thank the Dursleys. If it weren't for them he'd of been a real mess, *'Oh, the irony...'*

They couldn't have known what he was. After all, who would've believed it?

'THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC!'

Harry sat up as though he'd been electrocuted. He was remembering his uncle's choice of words that day. He seemed to be overreacting, but then, wasn't that what the Dursleys did best? But now that he thought about it... They'd always freaked out at the slightest hint at magic.

A magician was the one thing Dudley had always been denied of at his birthday parties, regardless of how big a tantrum he threw. And Harry would never forget the scene Aunt Petunia caused when she found Dudley watching Fantasia. At the time, he'd wondered why she seemed so utterly horrified of Mickey Mouse.

Aunt Petunia was always evasive when he'd asked about his parents, *'And wasn't mum a witch? Petunia was the nosiest woman in the neighborhood. I doubt even she could miss it if her sister went off to a school for magic every year.'*

But how could the Dursleys hide that from him? *'Unless it disrupted their perfect little life,'* he thought bitterly, *'and since when have they ever told me anything?'*

It still seemed unbelievable that the Dursleys could know the existence of magic. The very same people that went to such lengths to seem like the perfect family, always worried what the neighbors would think. The Dursleys would never keep someone like Harry anywhere near themselves.

'But they didn't. They got rid of me as soon as the opportunity arose,' he reminded himself, *'The Dursleys couldn't have known!'* The logical part of his brain replied, *'Couldn't they?'*

'Wake up, you lazy brat!'

His aunt pounded on the cupboard once more. Harry groaned and rolled over. Couldn't she give him a break just once?

'Wake up!'

Obviously not.

"Wake up!"

"Coming, Aunt Petunia," Harry mumbled into his pillow. He reached over, feeling around for his glasses. Instead of meeting the wall of his tiny bedroom, Harry encountered a greater expanse of squishy bed than he was used to.

"Huh?" He opened his eyes blearily, seeing nothing but bright, velvety red. He found his glasses folded on the bedspread and put them on... just in time to see the quilted lion wake up.

Harry just stared dumbfounded at the animal until it blinked and opened its fanged jaws in a yawn.

"Aaah!" Harry jumped backwards in surprise, his leg getting caught in the blanket, and he went tumbling to the floor.

Blaise pushed open the door impatiently after calling her friend for several minutes. She was momentarily shocked to find him sitting up on the floor, rubbing his head and glaring at the bed. Her stomach soon made itself known, reminding her why she was there.

"Finally! I thought I was going to have to get Snape here to wake you up!" her eyes twinkled amusedly.

Harry snorted, "Are you trying to give me nightmares?"

Blaise watched him get off the floor, readjusting his glasses. She raised an eyebrow when he sat directly on the lion, muffling its growls.

"No, not today, Harry. Actually, I was coming to tell you it's time for dinner. My stomach demands food, and who knows how long it'll take us to find the Great Hall!"

"Well, we'd better get a move on," he said, standing up.

"Do you have any idea how to get back to the headmaster's office?" Blaise asked worriedly.

"Of course, I have an excellent sense of direction!" Harry declared.

"This is coming from the guy who got lost in the middle of a prank?"

She was referring to their first attempt to break into Cromwell's office. While going to meet Blaise, Harry had mistaken the janitor's closet for the office and got locked in. Luckily, the janitor found him a few hours later, and was nice enough not to mention the incident to anyone.

"Fine!" Harry gave her a wounded look, "If you don't want my help... I'll guess I see you later!" With that, he exited the room.

Blaise crossed her arms stubbornly, "Whatever! I'll just wait for Binky to come back and show me the way!"

Blaise sat in silence for several minutes. She tapped her foot irritably. Her stomach grumbled angrily at her. Blaise bit her lip indecisively. After another growl, she sighed in defeat.

"Harry, wait up!" She yelled, dashing out of the room to catch up with him.

Twenty minutes later...

"Are we there yet?" Blaise moaned.

"Um, almost there," Harry replied, a little unsure.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Blaise asked suspiciously.

"Er, I think so..." he responded slowly.

"This is hopeless!" Blaise slumped against the wall, "How exactly are we supposed to do this all year? Do you think they'll send a search party for us?" She turned to Harry, almost pleading for his answer.

"Maybe. After all, they can't lose their hero, now can they," he said jokingly.

"That didn't seem to stop them the first time," she said in a dry voice, "or did you forget that they haven't know where you were for six years?"

"Well, let's hope it doesn't take that long this time," Harry finished before continuing on their quest.

"Did you hear that?"

"What?" Blaise stared at Harry in confusion. They were still wandering the halls, not making much progress. Blaise was sure she'd seen that painting before...

Harry paused, his head tilted to the side, and listened carefully.

"Hisssss! You want a piece of me, furball?"

'There it was again! Sneak?' Harry frowned. Obviously, Blaise wouldn't be able to hear the snake.

"Rrreeooow!"

"What the hell was that?" Blaise certainly heard that, and jumped at the mad screeching coming from around the corner.

"C'mon!" Harry ran ahead.

'What's Sneak gotten into now?' he wondered.

They came around the stone wall and found the black reptile cornered, by what, Harry wasn't sure.

"Is that a *cat*?" Blaise stepped back nervously.

Harry squinted at the animal. It looked like dirty rag with pointy ears, and evil, red eyes. Sneak leered at the thing, which crouched on all fours and whipped its tail angrily. The cat licked its lips hungrily, and arched its back in anticipation.

"Bring it on, kitty!"

'He just doesn't know when to shut up,' Harry thought wearily.

Sneak's predator stalked forward and pounced, only to smack into Harry as he intercepted it.

"Ouch!" Harry grit his teeth as the cat's claws dug into his arm, "Get off, you furry menace!" He shook his arm and sent it flying three feet away.

"Harry, are you okay?" Blaise came over now that show was over. She winced in sympathy when she saw the bloody rip in his sleeve.

"I'll be fine," he looked down at the troublesome snake.

"Where have you been?" he hissed angrily, completely forgetting his friend who looked on in confusion.

Sneak straightened his coils indignantly, *"I was exploring! It's not every day you're in a place like thisss. I just knew there had to be plenty of juicy rats sssomewhere. I got losst, and by the time I finally found one, that monsster showed up! She ate my lunch!"*

Harry rolled his eyes.

"Uh, Harry. What are you doing?"

Harry's eyes widened and he turned around to find his best friend watching him speculatively.

"Were you *talking* to Sneak?"

"Of course he was! Why shouldn't he? He talks to you all the time..."

Harry ignored the snake's muttering and bit his lip while he thought of an explanation.

Blaise tapped her foot impatiently, "I'm waiting..."

'To hell with it.'

"Yes," Harry flinched and prepared for an explosion.

"I knew it!" Blaise punched a fist in the air triumphantly.

"Huh?" Harry stared at her disbelievingly.

"I knew it!" she repeated, "All those times I saw you whispering to him! At first I thought you were lonely or something, but that's what I'm here for-"

Harry snorted.

Blaise pretended not to hear him and continued, "And then there are all those pranks! I could never figure out how you trained Sneak to do all that stuff! At first I just thought he was smart-"

"Hey!"

"-but now, with this whole magic thing, it all makes sense! You can talk to Sneak, and he can talk back!" Blaise smirked proudly, looking as though she'd just discovered the meaning of life.

"Uh, yeah. That's pretty much it," Harry admitted sheepishly, "I would have told you sooner, but I was afraid you think I'd finally lost it."

"I probably would have. So, tell me, what kinds of stuff does a snake have to say anyway?"

"Well, first I think all you humans are ssstupid. You're one of the worst. You're constant chattering gives me a headache, and you're completely clueless. How can you not sssee what's right in front of you? It's obvioussss Harry likes you-"

Blaise watched Harry listen to Sneak. He had a weird expression on his face, and his skin went from pale to bright red in seconds.

"So what did he say?"

"Uh-he-I," Harry stuttered, "W-well, er-"

"Norrie!" A sudden shout interrupted Harry, saving him from what would have been a tremendously awkward conversation.

Blaise and Harry looked over and saw a creepy old man limping towards them. He lurched over toward the cat, who purred at the sight of him.

"Are you alright Mrs. Norris? Did those nasty children hurt you?"

"Mrs. Norris?" Blaise mouthed silently to Harry. He shrugged, turning back to the nauseating sight before him. The old man was hunched over, petting the demon cat affectionately.

"I wonder what happened to Mr. Norris?" Blaise whispered, and Harry snickered.

The noise caught the attention of the man. The sickeningly sweet smile he'd worn moments ago, turned into cruel grimace as he saw the two children.

"New brats, eh? You'd better be careful this year, I'm watching you..." With that disturbing message, he stalked off, his familiar trotting after him faithfully. Mrs. Norris looked back one last time to glare menacingly at Sneak, who in turn, flicked out his tongue tauntingly.

'Keep an eye out for the caretaker, Mr. Filch. He prowls the halls, looking for students up to no good...'

'That must have been Filch,' Harry realized, remembering Dumbledore's warning.

"Harry, stop!" Blaise held out a hand, halting her friend. Harry raised an eyebrow curiously as she sniffed the air.

"Blaise, what-"

"Food!" She shouted gleefully before grabbing his hand and taking off towards the tantalizing scent. Harry shook his head as he wondered how he managed to meet the strangest people.

"Hey, get moving!" Sneak hissed impatiently, "I'm still hungry!"

Meanwhile, in the Great Hall...

"Albus, didn't you inform the children what time dinner was?" Minerva McGonagall asked the question that was on everyone's mind. All the teachers were anxious to meet Harry Potter, with the obvious exception of Professor Snape, but it had been thirty minutes, and still no sign of them.

"Figures Potter would keep us waiting. No respect for others! Probably wants to make an entrance-"

"Now, Severus, surely you can look past childish grudges," Albus interrupted gently. His colleague was known for his school rivalry with James Potter, and the headmaster was worried he would turn those feelings onto James' son.

"Albus-" Snape growled in warning.

Suddenly, the doors banged open, dissipating the tense atmosphere. Many of the teachers gave a sigh of relief. None of them wanted to hear Snape lose his temper. Again.

They watched eagerly for a sign of the Boy Who Lived. Some were surprised to see a young girl with long, reddish-brown hair practically dragging Harry Potter toward the table of food. Harry just went along with it as though it were nothing out of the ordinary.

As soon she noticed the teachers staring at her, Blaise blushed and let go of Harry's wrist. She fidgeted nervously until Dumbledore spoke up.

"Ah, we were wondering where you had gotten to. Come, have a seat," he gestured to the empty seats between a stern-looking

woman next to him and a giant. Neither looked very inviting to them, but at least Snape was on the other side of Dumbledore.

After making sure Sneak was hidden in his pocket, Harry nodded to Blaise and they made their way to their seats.

"Um, sorry we're late, we got kinda sidetracked," Harry muttered embarrassedly.

Snape snorted but refrained from comment. Blaise noticed and elaborated.

"We got lost. Seriously, how do you find anything in this place? All the halls look exactly the same, and one of the paintings was following us! I thought we were going in circles until he confessed!"

Dumbledore laughed cheerily, and a few others joined in.

"Yes, I know how you feel. When I first came here, I remember trying to find the divination tower. Took me two hours to figure out I was wandering the dungeons instead of the instead! Quite embarrassing! A house elf found me at some point..."

"Eh-hem," the serious woman politely interrupted his ramblings and raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, right. Sorry there. Sometimes I get a little carried away. Anyway, you've already had the pleasure of meeting Professor Snape," here both parties rolled their eyes, "This is Professor McGonagall, your Transfigurations teacher," he gestured to the woman on his left. She gave a small smile, allowing them to relax in her presence.

"That is our grounds keeper, Hagrid," Dumbledore indicated the huge man. His beetle-black eyes twinkled warmly and his beard twitched in a smile.

He continued by introducing Professor Flitwick, a tiny man who tumbled off his chair in excitement at meeting Harry. They met Professor Sprout, a plump woman with a kind face. There was also Professor Binns, who Blaise and Harry were stunned at. He was a ghost! Harry waved a hand nervously. When she thought no one was

looking, Blaise brushed her fingers through his smoky essence, shivering at the icy feeling that spread up her arm. Binns barely acknowledged them. Last was Professor Quirrell. He had on a round purple turban, and twitched at every sound. When he turned to greet them, Harry saw him still for a moment, and something flashed through his eyes. Then it was gone, and Quirrell was stuttering a hello.

"As you all know," Dumbledore addressed the staff, "Harry Potter will be starting at Hogwarts this year with his friend, Blaise Zabini."

Neither Harry nor Blaise noticed when the staff tensed at Blaise's last name. They were both too busy devouring the roast chicken and getting extra helpings of mashed potatoes.

Blaise herself barely acknowledged her last name. She had been brought to the orphanage when she was only two, and couldn't remember anything from her old life. Last names weren't really used when you were up for adoption, but Blaise had hung onto it as a reminder of her parents.

"So, Harry, Blaise, what did you think of the guest rooms?" Dumbledore pretended not to notice the awkward silence at the table, and changed the subject to give the others time to regain their composure.

"Ish amashing!" Blaise exclaimed through a mouthful of pudding.

"Yeah, it's really nice," Harry agreed. Then he remembered something, "I was wondering, are the school colors red and gold?"

Snape nearly choked on his drink, and McGonagall hid a smile behind her hand as Hagrid patted the man on the back. Snape snarled at Hagrid after he was knocked into the table, and grabbed a napkin to clean up the spilled pumpkin juice.

"Actually," Dumbledore himself didn't bother to hide his mirth, "It is only one set of school colors. We have four houses at Hogwarts. You will eat, sleep, and go to classes together. You can also earn points for your house, or have them taken away. At the end of the year, the

house with the most points will win the house cup. At the opening feast, first years will be sorted into one."

"Oh," Harry nodded, trying to store the information, "So what are the four houses?"

"The houses are named after the four founders," McGonagall picked up the conversation, "There is Gryffindor. I am the head of house there. Gryffindors are known for bravery. Our symbol is a lion with red and gold."

"I'm head of Ravenclaw house," tiny Professor Flitwick piped up, "They're the cleverest! Our house is represented by a raven with bronze and blue."

Sprout chipped in, "I am in charge of Hufflepuff, my students are known for being hard workers and loyal. We have a badger in black and yellow."

"That's only three houses. What's the fourth?" Blaise liked the sound of these houses, but none seemed to really fit them personally.

"Severus, why don't you tell them about your house?" Dumbledore suggested.

Snape sneered in response, "Why bother? They could never get into Slytherin. It is a house only for the best. Slytherins are cunning, something I highly doubt of these two. Our emblem is a silver and green snake."

Harry's interest perked up. *'Snakes, eh? And cunning? Well, that could certainly describe the troublesome two,' he chuckled recalling the nickname he and Blaise had made for themselves at the orphanage.*

"That house sounds pretty cool. What do ya think, Harry?"

When Harry nodded, it was McGonagall's turn to choke on her pumpkin juice, while Snape scowled darkly.

"Like I said, you two could never make it into Slytherin. You'll probably be in Gryffindor like your arrogant father."

Harry looked at Snape in shock and more than a little anger when he insulted Harry's father. Instead of rising to the bait, he smirked and replied coolly, "I thought Slytherin was about cunning?"

At Snape's stiff nod he continued, "Well, how do you think we got to Diagon Alley? You don't actually think if we asked nicely the head of the orphanage would give us a ride to pick up some spell books?"

Blaise kicked Harry under the table as McGonagall's lips thinned.

"You didn't tell anyone where you were going? Won't they be worried?" Even Dumbledore looked a little upset at what the orphanage would think when the two children disappeared.

Harry gave him a look that easily be interpreted as *'Are you kidding?'*

Dumbledore sighed, "I will have to write Mr. Cromwell a letter for now, and we'll deal with it later."

As dinner progressed, Harry and Blaise got to know their new teachers better. Their first impression of Snape didn't change, but they got along well with Hagrid. He told Harry he'd known him as baby and was so sorry he didn't check on him at the Dursleys. He'd starting sobbing on Harry's shoulder at one point, while the small boy tried not to collapse under the weight.

Blaise ignored his dilemma while talking to Professor McGonagall. She wasn't as stiff as she'd seemed at first. McGonagall was a fair teacher, but Blaise already knew she was not one to mess with. She didn't want to know what would be the consequences of rolling *her* desk down a flight of stairs.

While the other teachers conversed, and Snape sat scowling at his plate, no one noticed Quirrell's intense gaze focused on the Boy Who Lived...

Review!

"Yeh two ready ter go?" Hagrid asked as they walked up to the fireplace.

Harry and Blaise were back in Dumbledore's office preparing to use... what was it called, floo travel? They needed to revisit Diagon Alley as they hadn't managed to buy their school supplies, and summer was almost over. Hopefully, they wouldn't run into any trouble this time.

When they nodded an affirmative, Hagrid squeezed into the fireplace. He shouted 'Diagon Alley' and was gone when Harry blinked.

"How does this work again?" Harry asked nervously, eyeing the green flames at least twice his height.

"Simply grab a pinch of floo powder, drop it in and clearly state the place you wish to go. Be sure to keep your elbows tucked in, try not to breathe in the soot, and you might want to close your eyes..."

"...Right. Blaise, why don't you go first?" Harry stepped back, gesturing to his friend to precede him.

"Oh, you're such a gentleman, Harry," she said sarcastically.

Dumbledore chuckled in the background, "You have nothing to worry about, Harry."

Harry smiled at his own anxiousness and joined Blaise in scooping up a handful of the glittery powder.

"Professor," he paused, remembering something, "What if someone recognizes me?"

"Yeah," Blaise grinned, "the wizarding world doesn't have paparazzi, does it?"

Dumbledore seemed to consider it before getting an idea, "I have just the thing," he said, pulling out old, crooked wand. He did a complicated sort of twirling motion and pointed at Harry's head before muttering, "*Elicio!*"

There was a flash, and Harry felt a weight on his head. He looked up at Dumbledore, who was smiling triumphantly, to Blaise, whose mouth was trembling. Suddenly, she burst out laughing. Harry, feeling slightly worried, turned to Dumbledore, who waved his wand to produce a mirror. Harry took a deep breath and looked in. His own reflection stared back, eyes wide, and mouth gaping. On his head sat a dark blue muggle hat. In big red letters, a saying was spread across the front:

'I went to the wizarding world, and all I got was this stupid hat.'

He turned to Dumbledore for an explanation.

"If you keep this on, hiding your rather distinctive features, such as your scar, no one will realize who you are. To them, you will seem just another muggleborn student shopping in Diagon Alley."

Harry conceded at the logic of the plan, even if the hat did make him feel like a crazed tourist. He turned back to the fire, scattering the powder. Blaise was still laughing, but after a glare, she snapped her mouth shut, only releasing the occasional giggle.

The flames were warm and tickled when he stepped in. He shouted the destination, taking extra care to pronounce it properly. He did not want to end up flying out someone's chimney if he got it wrong.

Harry cheered up a little at the thought of going back to Diagon Alley. He never did finish seeing all the shops. In his excitement, he never noticed the added bulk in the pocket of his baggy jeans, nor how it twitched at the unfamiliar feeling of floo travel.

"Ahh!" Harry gasped as he came flying out into the Leaky Cauldron. The trip had deposited him none too gently, and he was already dizzy from the sensation of spinning past hundreds of fireplaces with no control.

"There yeh are, 'Arry!" He felt a large hand pick him up off the floor and brush off his soot-covered clothes with enough force to knock him down again.

"Whoa!" Another voice yelled out, and Blaise slid out of the fire, crashing into Harry.

She looked down at her dusty apparel and sneezed uncontrollably, "Couldn't wizards-AAACHOO!-find a cleaner way to get somewhere? AAACHOO!"

Harry nodded in agreement. His head was still spinning, "That is definitely not my favorite mode of transportation."

"C'mon you two. First stop, *Gringotts Wizarding Bank*," he announced, leading them toward the same alleyway they'd gone through last time.

They watched him open the portal with a frilly pink umbrella. Harry assumed Hagrid was using this in place of a wand, though he couldn't understand why. He and Blaise paid special attention to the particular bricks Hagrid tapped. The wall dissolved, revealing a sight that was no less enchanting the second time around.

"Hagrid?" Harry asked, worry seeping into his tone as they walked, "about this bank..."

Blaise realized where Harry was going first and felt her spirits dampen.

"How do we pay for our supplies? Orphans don't exactly get wages."

Hagrid paused while climbing the steps of a tall marble building, "Now really, did yeh think yer parents left 'ya nothin'?"

Harry gaped as the man twinkled in a way disturbingly reminiscent of the headmaster.

When he followed Hagrid into the building, Harry was jerked back by Blaise's sudden grip on his arm.

"Blaise, what-" he trailed off as he noticed her frightened stare focused on the front desk.

"Harry, are those... *oompa loompas*?"

Harry did a double take when he noticed what kind of person Hagrid was talking with. It was a tiny man almost the size of Professor Flitwick. He had browned, wrinkly skin, pointy ears, and beady eyes. His clawed hands were studying a golden key that Hagrid has just handed him. He seemed to feel Harry's gaze and looked over the counter at the two children with narrowed eyes.

Harry knew why Blaise was so panicked. They seen an old movie called 'Charlie and the Chocolate Factory' when they were six. It consisted of several children getting to visit the famous candy factory owned by Willy Wonka. It was run by many small orange people called oompa loompas. Those same children were slowly killed off when they got into some of the more dangerous candies. Blaise had been seriously freaked out by the colorful midgets. It had taken many pep talks from Harry to convince her chocolate was safe before she regained her sweet tooth. She'd also gotten over her irrational fear of short people, but even Harry had to agree with her on this.

The thing Hagrid was talking to, and he now saw there were more talking to other customers, brought back memories of the movie. The house elves hadn't. They were just too timid. Little Professor Flitwick didn't. He was too friendly, even if he did tend to get overexcited in the presence of 'The Boy Who Lived'. But these were rather dangerous-looking. In fact, when he noticed Blaise's hesitation, the creature gave a sadistic smile.

"Harry..." Blaise whimpered, cutting the circulation off to his arm when she squeezed tighter.

"Shh... As long as they don't start singing, I think we're okay..." Harry tried to reassure her, even as he held the piercing gaze, "And don't accept any candy from strangers..."

"Harry? Blaise?" Hagrid had been headed to the vaults with an assistant named Griphook, when he realized he was alone.

"What are yeh doin'?" he asked when he came back for them. Harry seemed to be having a staring contest with the bank manager, while Blaise looked around frantically at the other workers.

"H-Hagrid?" she squeaked when his shadow fell over them, "What are they?"

"Oh, they're goblins, 'o course!"

"Goblins?" Harry looked up in interest, breaking the manager's steady gaze.

"Oh," Blaise relaxed at the new information. She released the painful grip she had on her best friend's arm.

"C'mon, let's get yer money," Hagrid said, beckoning them toward the impatient goblin still waiting for them.

The goblin led them to a dark stone cavern. It was completely empty except for multiple tracks leading off into the distance. Within moments, a cart arrived. They followed Griphook in. Hagrid took up at least half the room, leaving Blaise and Harry to squeeze in together in the other side.

Harry was just wondering how they were going to get to the vault. It must be far if they needed a ride. Suddenly, their cart took off with much more speed than Harry thought possible for the tiny vehicle. He barely kept his hat from blowing off.

Griphook seemed completely bored with the entire trip, but Blaise and Harry were having the time of their lives. Both had their arms waving in the air as though it was a rollercoaster, which, Harry thought, wasn't too far off. There were several sharp turns on the ride, and at one point, a drop that made it feel as though Harry's stomach had jumped in his throat. Hagrid wasn't faring too well. What they could see of his complexion was a startling shade of green.

When they finally came to a stop, Harry laughed out loud at the condition of Blaise's hair. Her long, reddish locks were all blown back, though Harry imagined he couldn't look much better. He'd had to hold onto his gaudy hat after it flew off, smacking Griphook while Harry stammered apologies. Griphook had sneered at the bright writing and handed it back.

"Key, please," Griphook held out his hand, and the tipsy giant handed him a gold key. Griphook placed it in a nearly invisible hole inside the massive door. Harry could hear the clicks of many locking mechanisms before it opened, letting out a gust of stale air.

The gloom of the tunnel was briefly dispersed by the soft metallic glow coming out of the vault. Harry gasped at the contents. Instead of the usual paper money muggles used, there were mountains of coins. Some were bronze and silver, and was that gold?

"Wow," Blaise whispered in awe from beside him, "Hey, Harry?" she asked, adopting a casual tone.

"Yeah?" he answered, still too shocked to form a more articulate response.

"Think 'ya could lend me some money for school supplies?"

"Sure..."

"Thanks."

After scooping a few handfuls of the coins into a leather bag provided by Griphook, they got back into the cart. Harry was still gazing awestruck at all the money in his hands.

"Don' worry, I'll explain the currency to ya later," Hagrid managed without gagging, misinterpreting Harry's look.

A short trip deeper into the darkness, and they stopped again.

"Vault seven hundred and thirteen," Griphook announce dully.

Harry and Blaise stayed in the cart while Hagrid went in, still wobbling. He came back not five minutes later with a grubby little box wrapped in brown paper. He shoved it into his coat quickly, trying to be discreet. The move obviously caught the duo's attention.

"Hagrid?" Blaise started as they headed back up the tunnel

Hagrid grunted to show he was listening, one hand hovering over his mouth nauseously.

"What was that?"

"What was what?"

Harry raised an eyebrow, "That package you took from the vault."

"Don' know what yer talkin' 'bout," he muttered unconvincingly.

"Hagrid-"

"Oy, look! Is that a dragon?" He interrupted, pointing down a tunnel leading off their path.

Harry was about to roll his eyes at the pathetic distraction, that is, until Blaise gasped. He looked back just in time to see a spout of orange flame flicker out of sight.

"That-what was that?" Harry asked Hagrid, temporarily forgetting their earlier conversation.

"It was a dragon. Always wanted one for a pet..." he trailed off with a dreamy smile replacing the sickened one.

Harry turned to Blaise and saw her mouthing, 'Nutters.'

"Okay, let's see. We need to get ye measured for yer school uniforms..." Hagrid said as he handed back Harry's supply list.

He ushered them into *Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions* before heading back to the Leaky Cauldron 'fer a pick-me-up.'

"Hello, dears," a plump witch came up to them, tape measure in hand, "Hogwarts then?"

"Yes," Harry looked around at the clothing for sale as they followed her to a back room. He didn't see anything like the stuff muggles wear on the clothing racks... in other words, nothing normal.

"Umm, excuse, me?" Harry asked as Madam Malkin told them to stand on the stools.

"Yes?" she replied absentmindedly, as she told him to stretch out his arms.

"What exactly are the school uniforms?"

"Oh, students wear slacks, white shirts, black robes, and a tie and badge to signify your house later on," she explained.

"Robes?" Blaise asked confusedly.

"Yes, of course. You must be muggleborn. Everyone in the magical community wears them," she finished taking notes on their size and went to find some clothing.

"It still looks like a dress," Harry muttered, taking in the colorful wizarding outfits around the store. He grabbed something off the rack and held it up, looking in one of the mirrors, "What do you think, Blaise?"

Madam Malkin came back before Blaise could answer and saw Harry, "Oh, no, dear!" She took the scarlet material from him, giggling slightly, "Those are for witches," she said, though Harry couldn't see the difference.

He heard Blaise's muffled laughter, "Not a word..." he grumbled before trying on the black robe Madam Malkin handed him.

After getting fitted for their uniforms, Hagrid took them to pick up several other items, including telescopes for Astronomy and dragon hide gloves for Herbology. Potions was the most... disturbing class to shop for. The apothecary was filled with shelves of ingredients that Harry couldn't identify and was probably happier not knowing.

Blaise was particularly grossed out by one of the jars she bumped into while looking for beetle eyes. Some kind of furry creature was floating in the liquid, and upon closer inspection, they realized it was still moving. Blaise shrieked loudly in the quiet store when the

creature's eyes opened. She'd had to wait outside while the shopkeeper helped Harry find the rest of their supplies.

Next, they went into *Flourish and Blotts*, the bookstore. Both children walked out with a pile of books considerably heavier than need be. Harry had spotted several things that caught his interest such as 'Hex Your Enemies' and 'The Trickster's Book of Charms'. He made sure to hide the title of that one. Harry also discovered 'Quidditch Through the Ages'. It described the most popular wizarding sport, which was played on brooms. After the first few pages, he was entranced. The proprietor had to ring it up while he was still reading. On his way out, a book called 'Hogwarts: A History' stood out on the shelf. Shrugging, he picked it up and added it to his pile.

On the way to buy their wands, Harry and Blaise caught sight of *Gambol and Japes*. Hagrid, seeing his charges slowly wandering off towards the joke shop, was quick to grab them by the back of their shirts and literally drag them into *Ollivanders*.

The wand shop was extremely dusty and looked deserted. Harry was wondering if they should just come back later, when a voice came from the corner, causing everyone, including Hagrid, to jump in surprise.

"Hello, there," an old man with piercing gray eyes walked out of the shadows. He looked calculatingly at both children, and Harry tugged on his hat nervously.

"Rubeus Hagrid," Ollivander turned to the giant, "Oak, sixteen inches, rather bendy wasn't it?"

"It was, sir," Hagrid replied nervously. Harry really couldn't blame him. Mr. Ollivander was unnerving.

"Very good wand, but I suppose they snapped it in half when you were expelled..."

Harry and Blaise exchanged a silent glance at the news. What could Hagrid have done to be expelled?

"Er, yeah," Hagrid replied uncomfortably, "Still got the pieces though..."

"But you don't use them?" Ollivander looked stern for a moment.

"O course not!" Hagrid tightened his grip on the frilly pink umbrella nervously, "Well, er, I'll just leave you two fer a minute. I'll be waitin' outside," Hagrid shuffled out the door under the scrutinizing gaze of Mr. Ollivander.

"Well, now," he turned back to the children, "Miss Zabini, which hand is your wand arm?"

"Oh!" Blaise looked startled now that his attention was on her, "Well, I'm left handed..."

For the next ten minutes, Mr. Ollivander had Blaise trying several different wands. He would hand her a new one and ask her to wave it about. Soon, he didn't even wait before snatching it out of her hand and giving her another. Neither Blaise nor Harry was sure what he was waiting for.

Finally, he handed Blaise another wand, and after it barely touched her finger tips, violet sparks shot out. Blaise squeaked, and nearly dropped it in surprise.

"Oh, yes!" Mr. Ollivander cheered, "Ebony, unicorn hair, eight and a half inches, rather temperamental if I do say so..." Harry snickered. It sounded like Blaise had found the perfect wand.

"Mr. Potter, which is your wand hand?" Harry sighed at the thought of another round of pass the stick.

He ended up taking even longer. Apparently, Harry's magic decided to annoy him today because he wasn't the only one yawning by the time they reached the twenty-ninth wand. Blaise was slumped in a chair while Harry leaned against the counter. Mr. Ollivander seemed frustrated but excited at the same time. He came out from the very back of the room with a box. He seemed a little unsure as he pulled out the wand.

Harry took it tiredly. He held it for a few seconds but Ollivander didn't take it back. He seemed to be waiting for something...

Blaise watched the proceedings quietly, wishing she had a watch. Suddenly, a light breeze picked up. She almost dismissed it as an open window. Then she looked at Harry.

His green eyes were eerily bright in the dark room, glowing almost like a cat's. He hadn't seemed to notice anything, but Mr. Ollivander was watching him with a rapt expression.

Harry thought he felt a tingle in his fingers and looked down at the wand. He noticed Mr. Ollivander watching, so he gave it a small wave, but instead of the usual disappointment, the tip of the wand lit up. Just as he finished waving it, two things happened. Before Harry knew what was happening, a rush of energy flowed through his arm and into the wood. Then the tiny light expanded, lighting up the entire store.

To anyone paying attention outside, they might have seen a red glow seeping under the door of *Ollivanders*. If the curtains in the front window had been open, they would have seen the faces of two children, first years by the look of them, completely gobsmacked. And in the background, Mr. Ollivander stood with a knowing smile on his face.

"Congratulations, Mr. Potter. It seems we have found the correct wand for you," Mr. Ollivander said as they paid for their purchase.

"Finally," Blaise muttered.

"What was that?" Harry breathed, still holding his wand, though now he was a little wary of it.

"That was holly, phoenix feather, eleven inches, quite unpredictable and very powerful..." he seemed to be debating something with himself before he continued, "I remember every wand I've ever sold, Mr. Potter. It just so happens, that the phoenix whose feather resides in your wand gave just one other. Its brother belonged to the very same wizard who gave you that scar. The wand always chooses the

wizard, remember that. I think we can expect great things from you, Mr. Potter. After all, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named did great things... terrible, but great."

On the way out of the store, Blaise watched Harry out of the corner of her eye. She could see he was having some conflicting feelings after the revelation that his wand shared a core with the very monster that killed his parents.

"Harry?" she called softly to get his attention.

His head snapped up as though he'd forgotten she was there, "Yeah?"

"Don't worry about it. It doesn't mean anything. I know you, Harry. You're my best friend. No matter what anyone thinks about you, don't forget that."

Harry looked up at Blaise and smiled, "Thanks."

"Anytime, Harry."

"Hey, there yeh are!" Hagrid caught up to them with his long strides, "I was wonderin' what happened to 'ya!"

"Hey, Hagrid. It was nothing, I guess our magic's just a little picky. We must have gone through every wand in there!" Blaise said, giving Harry a quick wink.

"Well, we're just 'bout done unless ye want ter make one last stop?"

"Where?"

"Well, yer aloud to take a pet ter Hogwarts. An owl, cat, or toad is recommended. I'd say an owl. Their dead useful, deliver yer mail an' stuff."

"Sounds like a good idea," Harry said, following Hagrid into *Eeylops Owl Emporium*.

"Er, Harry, who exactly would we send a letter to? It's not like we can be pen pals with the orphans while we're at a magical castle in... well, wherever Hogwarts is."

"I know," Harry lowered his voice as he pulled something out of one of his magically-expanded shopping bags. It was a catalogue for *Gambol and Japes*.

"How did you get that?" Blaise gasped, looking as though Christmas had come early.

"I grabbed *it* right before Hagrid grabbed *us*. I figured we can always order anything we need. Apparently we just fill out the order form at the back and send it with an owl."

They stepped into the musty shop. Owls of all sizes crowded around the walls, taking up every available space. While Blaise looked around, Harry remembered the white owl he'd glimpsed on their first trip to Diagon Alley. He wondered if she was still here...

Lost in his thoughts, Harry once again missed the movement in his pocket. It didn't help that his clothes were so large; Mrs. Norris could be living in there and he wouldn't notice. So of course, he never saw the black coils slither out and drop to the floor. He also didn't hear the hissed exclamations of freedom over the hooting of owls. The only thing he *did* notice was when the fluttering sounds in the ceiling seemed to double, and the next thing he knew, dozens of owls were diving towards something on the ground.

"What the-" he turned around just as someone screamed.

A quick look around showed that the birds had totally lost it. They were swooping across the store while customers ducked. A few wizards pulled out their wands, trying to subdue the owls.

"Harry!"

Harry looked up and saw Blaise waving frantically. She was pointing in the middle of the melee where most of the birds seemed to be

headed. He shook his head in confusion until he heard her yelling something else. *'Eek? Leek? Seek? Oh, crap!'* he realized, *'SNEAK!'*

Harry double-checked his hat before running into the commotion, searching frantically for a little black snake in the mess of tawny feathers.

"Sneak!" he spotted a flash of scales. Unfortunately, it looked like the reptile was cornered by a very hungry-looking eagle owl.

He wasn't going to get there in time! There were too many owls in the way and quite a few screaming witches as well. Finally, someone had the sense to open the door, and many of the owls took flight into the busy street, leaving him room to breath. Just as the eagle owl moved to snatch sneak in its beak, a blur of white scooped him up.

Harry was afraid that the new owl was just going to eat Sneak instead. Then he recognized it. It was the snowy owl! She fluttered down as more of the other birds were captured. Hagrid had several perched on his huge coat. Outside, people were gathering around the entrance, eager to see what was going on.

Harry held out his arm, and the white owl settled on it, Sneak still clutched in one talon. She released him gently into Harry's palm before settling to preen her feathers.

"Thanks," Harry said to the owl, grateful even if she couldn't understand what he was saying.

"Sneak," he whispered, careful not to let anyone hear, *"Are you alright?"*

"No, I'm not bloody alright! Is every animal I meet in the magical world going to try and eat me? The injustice of it all! You know, snakes have feelings too, and it's not like we're at the bottom of the food chain..."

Harry took Sneak's rant as a sign that he was fine and tuned him out. He found Blaise, scowling as she pulled feathers out of her hair.

"Are you done yet?" she asked hopefully.

Harry nodded, showing her the white owl. He was definitely buying her.

"Um, hi," he moved towards the harried shopkeeper, "I'd like to buy this one, please."

The disgruntled man nodded, barely looking at Harry while he gave him his change.

Harry and Blaise followed Hagrid out the door, trying to get through the crowd still gathered. Both he and Blaise were exhausted and looking forward to a long nap when they got back to Hogwarts. Unfortunately, Harry just couldn't seem to get a break that day.

"Oh my goodness, it's Harry Potter!"

Harry gasped and reached up for his hat. It was gone...

"Damn."

"C'mon, Harry, I dare you."

Harry gulped as he looked down at the box in his hand. The packaging was of disarmingly bright colors, but he knew better. Inside were some of the most insidious wizarding sweets he had yet to try, and here was Blaise, knowing he never backed down from a dare.

Shakily, Harry dipped in his hand, pulling out a bright pink candy speckled with green. Taking a deep breath, he gave Blaise a fleeting glance, which she returned with a smirk, before popping it in his mouth.

"*Blearrhg!* Who in their right mind creates a vomit-flavored jelly bean?" Harry gagged spitting it out. Blaise sat on the floor of the compartment, howling with mirth. Harry gave her a glare before tossing the empty box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans.

He and Blaise were both riding in a compartment at the back of the Hogwarts Express. Dumbledore had insisted they go on the train so as not to arouse suspicion. After all, it seemed even the Ministry of Magic was unaware that their hero lived in a muggle orphanage. In other words, neither were any Death Eaters.

Halfway through the trip, a witch had come by with a trolley full of junk food, and Harry, after learning of the vault full of gold he'd inherited, couldn't resist buying at least one of everything. So to pass the time, he and Blaise had been munching on things like 'Cauldron Cakes' and 'Sugar Quills'. Then he'd spotted the beans, and it soon turned into a battle of wills and luck testing the unknown flavors. Blaise had gotten lucky, with a series of strawberry, chocolate, and toffee. The worst she had tasted was sardines. Poor Harry had only managed vanilla before getting grass, pepper, and the oh-so-wonderful vomit.

"Hey, what's this?" Harry picked up a box labeled 'Chocolate Frogs' while smiling evilly at Blaise. He handed it to her as she got back on her seat, "Your turn."

Blaise shut up quickly while looking inside. She nearly screamed when a dark brown frog hopped out. It took one look around the compartment with its chocolate eyes before leaping out the open window. Blaise gave a sigh of relief.

"Hey, no fair! I actually had to eat that bean!"

"Yes, well at least it wasn't moving!" Blaise retorted. She was still examining the package when she pulled out a card, "Hey, look, these things come with cards of famous witches and wizards you can collect."

Harry turned to her sharply, "Please tell me I'm not on one..."

Harry was still recovering from his first experience with fame. After the scene caused at Eeylop's Owl Emporium, a crowd of curious people had awaited him outside. Unfortunately, Harry had lost his hat. No matter how ridiculous it was, it still might have kept him safe. Instead, they'd been surrounded by witches and wizards all clamoring to shake his hand. Thank god for Hagrid. The giant had easily plucked Harry and Blaise from the swarm and made his way back to the Leaky Cauldron without any interruptions.

"Oh, relax, Harry, you're not on this one. It's Dumbledore. It says what he did on the back, listen to this..."

Albus Dumbledore

Currently Headmaster of Hogwarts

Considered by many the greatest wizard of modern times, Dumbledore is particularly famous for his defeat of the dark wizard Grindewald in 1945, for the discovery of the twelve uses of dragon's blood, and his work on alchemy with his partner, Nicolas Flamel. Professor Dumbledore enjoys chamber music and tenpin bowling.

"Wow, looks like you're not the only one to defeat a dark wizard," Blaise commented.

"That's nice to know," Harry replied, "How many of them are there exactly, and what's with the names? First 'Voldemort' and now 'Grindewald', not exactly fear-inspiring."

"Actually, Professor McGonagall told me everyone calls Voldemort 'You-Know-Who' or 'He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named'. It's like they're afraid of saying his name. Sheesh, it's not like he can hear them."

Their conversation on the stupidity of wizards continued until the compartment door slid open.

"Oy, Fred, look who it is!"

"I see, my dear George. It's the two pranksters in training-"

"Excuse me-" Harry slapped a hand over Blaise's mouth before she could finish her indignant outburst.

"I don't believe we finished introductions back at Diagon Alley-"

"This is our little brother, Ronniekins," they stepped aside to reveal a boy with the same vibrant red hair.

"It's Ron," he corrected with an irritated glance at his brothers.

"I'm Blaise Zabini," she allowed the twin on the right to shake her hand.

"Er," Harry began with some hesitation, "I'm Harry, Harry Potter."

Fred, or was it George, gasped, "Seriously?"

"Um, yeah."

George shook his brother out of his stupor, "Well, we just wanted to say hi," he shoved Ron further into the compartment, "We have to get going-"

"Our mate, Lee Jordan says he brought a huge tarantula!"

Ron gave a nervous shudder.

"-So enjoy the rest of the trip, little firsties-"

"-And stay out of trouble!" with that, the two left, and the compartment was filled with awkward silence.

Ron fidgeted nervously for a few minutes, before finally blurting out, "Is it true?"

"What?" Harry asked in confusion.

"Have you really got... the scar?"

Harry pulled back his bangs, revealing the infamous lightning bolt.

"Wicked," he breathed, his voice filled with a kind of reverence.

"Whatever."

Blaise saw her friend shift uncomfortably, and decided to change the subject, "So, are you starting at Hogwarts this year?"

"Yeah, I'll be the sixth in my family to come here," he said gloomily.

"Sixth? How many siblings do you have?"

"Well, first there was Bill, he's working for Gringotts now, then there's Charlie, studies dragons in Romania, Percy's still in school, prefect too, you met the twins, there's me, and next year my little sister Ginny will be starting here..."

"Damn," Blaise whistled, "Any more on the way?"

"No, I'm kinda hoping that's it. I think mum's just happy she finally had a girl."

"Mmm, whatss, that? I smell something deliciouss..."

Harry jumped at the sound coming from his school robes, causing both of his companions to stare at him strangely.

"You alright, mate?" Ron asked with a raised eyebrow.

"I'm fine," he said a little too quickly. When Ron continued talking about his family, Harry listened closely to the light hissing.

"Oooh, I haven't had a nice juicy rat in ages..."

Harry looked around and spotted a pink tail hanging out of the boy's pocket. Trying to be discrete, he clamped a hand on the sleeve Sneak was trying to emerge from.

"Um, Ron?"

Ron made a questioning noise, his mouth now filled with a left over pumpkin pasty.

"What's that?" Harry gestured to the quivering lump in his pocket.

The boy swallowed and reached in, pulling out a fat brown rat, "This is Scabbers. Got him from my brother, Percy. He's bloody useless, does nothing but sleep. Why?"

Harry thought quickly. He didn't think snakes were allowed at school; they certainly weren't suggested as familiars. Dumbledore might have known about Sneak, but he didn't seem inclined to say anything as long as Harry's friend stayed out of sight.

"Oh... it's just my owl, Hedwig," Harry pointed up, where a snowy white owl was perched on the luggage rack, "She has a certain affinity for rodents..."

By now, Blaise was looking at Harry as though he'd lost it. He met her gaze and glanced at his wiggling sleeve. Her eyes widened in recognition, and she struggled not to laugh.

"You don't think she'd try to eat him?" Ron placed a hand on his shirt protectively.

"Well, it's been a while since I fed her. She's new, and I have a little trouble controlling her," Harry heard the bird give an offended squawk, "You might want to put Scabbers away..."

The train ride lasted for another hour or so. Blaise and Harry tried to get to know Ron, which wasn't the easiest thing.

Harry had convinced him to put away his pet, although he knew he'd have to deal with two very pissed familiars later. Sneak was grumbling that he was going to starve to death at this rate, and Hedwig had turned away from him, disgruntled at being his scapegoat.

Ron Weasley wasn't as outgoing as his twin brothers, and seemed to have a lot of self-pity when it came to being one of the youngest of his siblings. One thing Harry and Blaise had learned was that he was set on Gryffindor. Ron's entire family had ended up there, and he had nothing good to say about the other houses.

It gave Harry a chance to see the four Hogwarts houses from another point of view, even a slightly prejudiced one. According to Ron, Gryffindors were all for the light side, and the Boy Who Lived could end up nowhere else. Ravenclaw was for the bookworms of the school. Hufflepuff was the more pathetic bunch, most of them were pushovers. On Slytherin, of course, Ron had the most to say,

"Just about every witch or wizard to go bad was in Slytherin... even You-Know-Who!"

Overall, Blaise and Harry found it a relief to get off the train at Hogsmead Station. They grabbed their trunks, which they'd been forced to bring just for show, and said farewell to Ron.

"Firs' years! Firs' years over here!"

"Hey, Hagrid!" Harry called as he and Blaise made their way over. All of the first years were gathering into boats, apparently to cross the lake. He, however, knew from experience that there were easier ways to get to the castle, such as the horseless carriages that the rest of the students rode in. The boat trip must have been for the experience alone.

He and Blaise soon discovered just what made the detour worth it. Even after staying at Hogwarts for a few days, it was still amazing to see the castle at night. The numerous windows and towers were lit up and twinkled over the water. Many of the students were exclaiming in awe. To even those of wizarding background, it was an enchanting sight.

The boats finally reached the shore and the students clambered out.

"Alrigh', make sure ya don' leave anythin' in the boats. If you'll just follow me-" Hagrid paused when something caught his eye, "Oy, any of you lot lose a toad?" he asked, referring to the green amphibian perched on his boot.

"Trevor!" a boy cried out in relief and ran to scoop up his pet. In the back, Harry heard a couple kids snicker rudely.

"Right, now follow me," Hagrid raised his torch and led the nervous students up the dark lawn.

They soon reached the massive front doors, and Hagrid knocked, the sound reverberating through the night. They swung open almost immediately, and Professor McGonagall beckoned them inside. She brought them to a small chamber just off the side of the Great Hall. Harry could already hear the murmur of hundreds of students from inside.

The first years huddled into the cramped room, whispering to their neighbors anxiously.

"How do you think they're going to sort us into our houses?" Blaise asked.

Harry shrugged. The staff had been unusually vague in explaining the process. Dumbledore claimed that it was supposed to be a surprise for the new students. In Harry's point of view, they just enjoyed watching the eleven-year-olds squirm.

"Do you think it will be some sort of test?" an Indian girl asked her twin.

A girl with frizzy brown hair started rattling off every spell she had read about to the others, who were listening to her know-it-all voice with desperate expressions. Harry guessed she was a muggleborn from the excitement in her voice as she described a scouring charm.

"My brothers said it hurts... a lot," Ron was telling them. The boy with the toad paled drastically and whimpered.

"Oh, that makes me feel better," Blaise told Harry.

He raised an eyebrow, "How?"

"If his brothers, as in Fred and George, told him that, then I would highly doubt the credibility of that statement." She pointed out sensibly.

Harry nodded in agreement. It was just too bad that Ron was gullible enough to believe them, as well as all the others listening to him describe the supposed torture Dumbledore would expose them to.

After several minutes of waiting, Blaise and Harry considerably calmer than the rest, McGonagall reentered. She gave a small, encouraging smile to the duo before addressing the others,

"Come along, we're ready for you."

The frightened whispers cut off abruptly at the headmistress's return, and the children scrambled to get a good place in line, meaning the back. They moved into the Great Hall under the expectant gaze of the student body. Some forgot their nerves as they examined the room, ooh-ing and ahh-ing at the magical ceiling, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside," the girl at the front of the line was happy to explain.

McGonagall halted them in front of the head table, where Dumbledore smiled warmly at them. The students looked around in confusion. *'Well? What next?'* Eventually, they followed the headmaster's gaze to find... a hat. An old, patched wizards' hat sitting on a stool in front of everyone.

"Okaaaay..." Blaise trailed off expectantly.

Suddenly, the frayed piece of headgear did the last thing any of them expected. It burst into song:

"Oh, you may not think I'm pretty,

But don't judge on what you see,

I'll eat myself if you can find

A smarter hat than me.

You can keep your bowlers black,

Your top hates sleek and tall,

For I'm the Hogwarts Sorting Hat

And I can top them all.

There's nothing hidden in your head

The Sorting Hat can't see,

So try me on and I will tell you

Where you ought to be.

You might belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart,

Their daring, nerve, and chivalry

Set Gryffindor apart;

You might belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are just and loyal,

Those patient Hufflepuffs are true

And unafraid of toil;

Or yet in wise old Ravenclaw,

If you've a ready mind,

Where those of wit and learning,

Will always find their kind;

Or perhaps in Slytherin

You'll make your real friends,

Those cunning folk use any means

To achieve their ends.

So put me on! Don't be afraid!

And don't get in a flap!

You're in safe hands (though I have none)

For I'm a thinking cap!"

p.118, Hp & PS

While the entire hall started clapping, Harry and Blaise stared openmouthed at the now-motionless hat.

"That was... interesting," Harry commented.

"Just when ya think the wizarding can't get any weirder..." Blaise added.

When the applause died down, Professor McGonagall walked forward with a long scroll, "When I call your name, please come forward and place the Sorting Hat on your head... Abbott, Hannah!"

A girl with blonde pigtails stepped forward, mentally cursing her initials, while Blaise silently cheered at her own last name, 'Zabini'.

The hat fell down over her eyes as she sat frozen on the stool. There was complete silence as everyone watched the hat. Ten seconds later, a mouth reappeared out of nowhere and shouted, "HUFFLEPUFF!"

The girl replaced the hat and ran over to a table under a yellow banner. Her housemates cheered as they shook hands and offered her a seat.

Bones, Susan joined Hannah in Hufflepuff moments later, and Boot, Terry became the first Ravenclaw. Brown, Lavender was a Gryffindor, and as she joined her table, Harry spotted a cluster of red hair, most noticeably, the catcalling twins. Bullstrode, Millicent became a Slytherin, and Harry took a moment to observe the house. While Hufflepuff had worn bright, perky smiles, and Ravenclaws had used polite clapping, the Gryffindors were the loudest, cheering and stomping. He noticed the Slytherins were unique in that they all seemed to have a mischievous smirk as they welcomed a new snake.

Soon Granger, Hermione was called. Harry realized it was the frizzy brunet. He expected her to end up in Ravenclaw. With all the information she'd been reciting earlier, she sounded like a textbook. Therefore, he was surprised when the hat placed her in Gryffindor. *'Maybe there's more to just personality in this...'*

When Longbottom, Neville was sorted, he was also put in Gryffindor. Of course, being put in the house of bravery didn't stop him from nearly running off with the hat in his excitement and tripping over his own feet on the way to bring it back. That caused a ripple of laughter as the boy hastily sat down to cover up his blushing.

As Harry's mind drifted, he jerked back to reality at the next name; Malfoy, Draco. Blaise elbowed Harry incase he wasn't already paying attention, "Look, it's that prat from Diagon Alley!" she groaned in irritation when he was put into Slytherin after the hat barely touched his head. She'd already had her heart set on the house for the cunning.

Harry didn't really mind where he went. Really, despite what one might think, he wasn't picky. The only cause for concern Harry had was that he and Blaise would be split up. They had been best friends for six years, and he didn't want that all to end because some cheapo, Halloween-rental hat put him in a different house! Unfortunately, by the time his name was called, he could only hope for the best, and that he wasn't put in Hufflepuff, because no amount of persuasion nor bribery would convince Blaise to transfer there.

"Potter, Harry!"

Harry gave a last glance at Blaise and she smiled nervously as he walked forward. Harry grumbled as some of the students didn't bother to hide their curiosity.

"Hey, did she say *Potter*?"

"Yeah."

"*The* Harry Potter?"

"Wow, I can't believe he's here!"

"I can't believe how cute he is!"

"I can't believe how small he is!"

Harry nearly paused in his stride, incredulous at the last two comments. Only a glance at the headmaster's twinkling, yet watchful, eyes prevented him from doing anything rash. He tried to ignore the stares he was receiving, and hurried to place the hat on. The entire hall was buzzing and the students leaned forward to get a good look at him.

"Hmmm, Mr. Potter," Harry restrained himself from jumping when a small voice whispered in his ear, "You are very difficult to sort..."

'Oh, please don't let this be a repeat of Ollivanders...' Harry thought. The hat already sounded like the old man, and if that was any clue, they could be here until morning.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm sure we'll find the house for you... Plenty of courage, I see, and not a bad mind either. You're quite loyal to your friends, but you can also be a deadly enemy. Really, you would do well in any house. But where to put you?"

"I just want to get this over with," Harry mumbled while trying not to express too many of his thoughts. It was uncomfortable having someone in your head...

"Ah, I see... your friend wants to go in Slytherin. You wouldn't do to bad in there either."

"Then why don't you put me there?"

"Impatient, aren't you?" the hat chuckled.

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Harry retorted sarcastically.

"Be careful, you're starting to sound like the Slytherin head of house..."

Harry cringed, *'Eww... him, like Snape?'*

"Despite your reaction to that, it seems Slytherin might be the right choice after all. The wizarding world will certainly be surprised to find their hero in Salazar's house..." If the hat could, Harry was positive it would be smirking right then.

"Well, I couldn't care less what they want," Harry glared at the inside of the hat, "If they think they know me so well, then they're in for a shock."

"I believe I have made the right choice. You have a far greater destiny than any can imagine, Harry Potter... Untapped power resides in you... When the time comes be sure to use it well..."

Before Harry could ask what the hat meant, it shouted for everyone to hear,

"SLYTHERIN!"

Harry lifted off the hat, wondering how long he had been sitting there. He would have stayed to ponder the hat's parting words, that is, until he noticed the ringing silence throughout the great hall. There was no applause, and he clearly heard the dull thunk of a goblet hitting the floor. He looked to the teachers' table for answers, and was startled at the way they were looking at him.

Dumbledore's classic twinkle was almost nonexistent, McGonagall was white-faced, even Hagrid had his mouth wide open. Snape's reaction threw him off the most. The man sat frozen in his chair, hand hanging limp in the air while his goblet rolled across the floor. His black eyes, for once not glaring with hatred, were glazed.

Harry would have congratulated himself on the potions master's loss of composure, if the rest of the school wasn't in a similar state.

A quick survey of the hall showed his peers in a similar state. The older students were more shocked at the staff table, while the unsorted first years looked at him in fear and confusion. Good old Blaise simply twitched an eyebrow and rolled her eyes at the dramatics.

"Eh-hem," Harry clearing his throat seemed to bring at least the Slytherins out of their stupor.

The table under the green and silver banner cheered uncharacteristically while McGonagall readjusted her parchment and straightened her robes. Dumbledore smiled grimly, and Professor Flitwick employed all his skills in charms in an attempt to revive Professor Snape.

Harry walked toward his new house, his heart beating uncomfortably fast. He was offered a seat between two older students as they shook his hand while looking smugly at the Gryffindors.

The sorting continued, and Harry managed to forget all about his own turn. He was able to focus his attention on Ron, sorted into Gryffindor, as he glared in a betrayed fashion at Harry. He was perfectly unaware of the calculating looks he was receiving from Draco Malfoy, as Blaise took a seat next to him, barely containing her excitement, or her mirth as she pointed out several parties that looked ready to jump him. He didn't notice the way quivering Professor Quirrell watched him throughout the feast. In fact, Harry even gave his own personal rendition of the school song along with Blaise, as the Weasley twins tried to compete. All in all, Harry decided blissful ignorance was very comforting. For a while, Harry could forget the mysterious words of the Hogwarts Sorting Hat as he and Blaise followed the other Slytherins to their dorm, wandering through the maze of dungeons. He put on a drowsy smile as he bid his best friend goodnight.

It wasn't until Harry was safe in his four-poster bed with the emerald hangings drawn shut, that he dared to think about the events of that day. Once his glasses were off, he started unseeingly at the canopy,

as though looking for answers. Harry didn't know what tomorrow would bring, but he was sure of one thing, it was going to be a long year...

"Oy, Harry, check this out!"

Harry looked up from his pancakes in annoyance. He had woken up late that morning as none of his oh-so-wonderful roommates thought to wake him. Now he was trying to stuff as much food down as possible before taking off for their first class.

"What is it?"

Blaise shoved a newspaper under his nose. It was a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"Where did you get this?"

"Oh, I just *borrowed* it from Pansy over there," she pointed down the table where a girl with short black hair and a pug-like face was talking to her friends, or rather, talking down to them.

"Ah, Blaise, don't tell me you haven't made any new friends yet?" Harry said in a stern voice while maintaining a straight face.

"Are you kidding?" Blaise looked at the chatting girls in disgust, "Tracey's not too bad, almost reminds me of a Ravenclaw, but Daphne is like Pansy's sidekick, and Millicent reminds me way too much of those apes following Malfoy around," Harry glanced at the hulking girl stationed next to Pansy and had to agree. She looked like a female version of Crabbe and Goyle, the two lackeys that followed the blonde boy around like a shadow.

"And the worst part," Blaise continued, "is that it's like they idolize that snob! She actually had the nerve to corner me last night and question me!"

"What did she want?" Harry asked in concern.

"That's the creepiest part! She wanted to know everything about you!"

Harry choked on his pumpkin juice.

"What?"

"Exactly what I said. She wanted to know how I knew you, where you grew up, what you were like, why you were in Slytherin, if you were single..."

"What did you tell her?" Harry cringed at the thought of this Pansy stalking him.

"Not much, just that we've known each other for years, and that your personal life was none of her business."

"Bet she didn't like that."

Blaise glared in the direction of said girl, barely noticing as her hands twisted the newspaper violently, "Of course not! She snubbed me and spent the next hour keeping me up with her annoying voice. I've never heard so much giggling in my life!"

Harry gently took the remains of the paper from his friend, wary of her temper, "Just forget about her. So what was it you wanted to show me?"

Blaise perked up immediately and pointed at an article on the front page.

Harry looked up at his anxious friend before scanning over the article.

BOY-WHO-LIVED SPOTTED IN DIAGON ALLEY

His eyes narrowed and he growled at the wizarding picture. It showed a clear shot of Hagrid walking down the cobbled street with Harry tucked under one arm, a dazed expression on his face.

"Oops, wrong one," Blaise grinned sheepishly and pointed at a different article further down.

GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 August, widely believed to be the work of Dark wizards or witches unknown.

Gringotts Goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day.

"But we're not telling you what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokesgoblin this afternoon.

"I wonder what they were trying to steal," Harry pondered aloud.

"I don't know, but did you look at the date?"

Harry reread the article and gasped, "That's the same day we were there! We must have just missed them!" his face took on a pensive look, "Blaise, it says the vault was emptied that very same day..."

Her eyes lit up with understanding, "Hagrid! He took something out, that little box. He was awfully suspicious about the whole thing..."

Harry and Blaise were both lost... again.

"I *knew* it!" Blaise shouted as they sped down another identical corridor.

"Knew... what?" Harry asked, panting.

"I knew we were going to have problems getting to class! How is it the rest of the first years have managed to find Defense Against the Dark Arts while we're still running around deserted hallways?" she clutched a stitch in her side as they climbed another staircase.

"The buddy system?" Harry suggested jokingly.

"Ha! Some buddy you are," Blaise grumbled.

Suddenly, the staircase jerked underneath them. The two held on for dear life as they swung across open air to stop at another door.

"Bloody hell!" Blaise cursed.

Harry trudged forward and went to grab the handle, hoping to figure out where they were.

"Stop!"

"What?" Harry looked around in confusion as Blaise tugged him away from the door, "Where are you going?"

"We can't go down there."

"Why?"

Blaise let out an irritated breath, "Harry, did you pay any attention at all to the welcoming feast?"

"Um, no." Harry thought back to feast. He hadn't really paid attention to anything. He was too busy trying to ignore everyone.

"Well, Dumbledore said that the third-floor corridor was 'out of bounds to any who do not wish to suffer a very painful death...'" she trailed off in a misty voice.

Harry snorted at the act, "Well, you know what that means?"

"What?"

"We have to go see what's down there!" Harry stated as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Blaise stared at him incredulously before hitting over the head.

"Ow!"

"Maybe later, Harry. I would rather not get detention for being late on the first day. We haven't even done anything yet!"

"Sorry we're late, Professor," Harry said after catching his breath. He and Blaise had finally found the classroom when a Gryffindor ghost took pity on them by pointing out that they should be heading in the *opposite* direction.

They burst into the room under the stares of both Slytherins and Ravenclaws. As they took their seats at the back, Harry squirmed under the looks he was receiving from both houses. Some were still suspicious of the Boy-Who-Lived's placement. Others seemed downright hostile, making Harry consider researching protection charms as soon as possible. Strangely, the Slytherins seemed to tolerate Blaise more, if not for her acquaintance with Harry Potter.

"N-not to w-worry, P-Potter," Professor Quirrell stuttered with a strange look in his eyes, "Just t-try to be on t-time. N-now b-back to the l-lesson..."

As Quirrell went on to describe his travels fighting the dark arts, Blaise sniffed the air.

"Do you smell garlic?"

"Must be protection against the vampire he fought in Romania. It's a real shame it got away," he whispered sarcastically.

"Too bad it didn't eat him," Blaise quipped.

Harry rolled his eyes as Quirrell recounted the time he got rid of a zombie for an African prince, receiving in return the giant purple turban he wore. He didn't see how a man that looked ready to die of a heart attack when a fly startled him could be a hunter of dark creatures. When a Ravenclaw named Terry Boot asked for details, Quirrell blushed and changed the subject.

Blaise started snickering, and Harry looked up quickly to see if Quirrell was going to reprimand them for talking. Instead, he found the man eyes focused solely on him. Harry held his penetrating gaze for a moment before something odd happened.

"Ah!" Harry clapped a hand to his forehead. He had felt a sharp stab of pain that seemed to go as quickly as it came. When he looked back up, Quirrell was speaking to the class as though nothing had happened.

"Harry, you okay?"

Harry shook his head and opened his textbook, "Yeah, I'm fine."

The rest of their week went by quickly. The subjects they were taking sounded fascinating, that is, if you were a fifth year. Then you got to try things a muggle could only dream of. Instead, as first years, Harry and Blaise were restricted to only the simplest spells until they read up on the theory.

Transfiguration, the study of changing one thing into another, was taught by Professor McGonagall. She gave the class a stern talking to about classroom conduct and turning in assignments on time. Then she turned her desk into a pig, causing the new students to gasp in awe and pull out their own wands eagerly. They were sorely disappointed when she said that was something they wouldn't even attempt until their OWLS, Ordinary Wizarding Tests. Instead, she ordered them to turn to page twenty-four in 'A Beginners' Guide to Transfiguration' and read for an hour. Afterwards, they were handed a single match and attempted to turn it into a needle.

"Ya know, I think it looks a little pointier," Blaise said in a hopeful voice as she examined her own match.

"Whatever you say, Blaise," Harry chuckled.

Blaise huffed and crossed her arms, "Fine! Why don't you try if you're so smart?"

Harry picked up his holly wand and tapped the match, picturing what he wanted to happen, "*Converto*."

It looked like nothing had happened, and Harry shrugged. *'Oh, well. It's not like I can expect it to work the first time... What the-'*

Harry felt a familiar tingle going down his arm, and gasped when a red spark jumped from the tip of his wand to the match. He watched, amazed, as it morphed into a perfect needle.

"How did you do that?" Blaise asked, awed and a little jealous.

"I have no idea."

"Potter, Zabini, how are you two coming along?"

McGonagall walked over to their table, ready to take off points for talking. She froze when the torches glinted off something metallic in front of Harry. To say she was stunned would be an understatement. Not even that nice Gryffindor, Miss Granger, had managed it in one try!

She gave a barely noticeable smile, "Five points to Slytherin. Keep up the good work, Mr. Potter."

Harry and Blaise exchanged surprised looks as she walked away. McGonagall had been a little stiff towards them of late. Harry assumed she was unhappy with his sorting. As the head of Gryffindor, she would have been expecting him to go there, just like his parents.

Another class was Herbology, taught by Professor Sprout. She had them working outside in the greenhouses. Blaise didn't mind it, but Harry was uncomfortably reminded of when he used to tend the garden for his aunt.

On Wednesdays, at midnight, they had Astronomy. There was no actual magic involved, just studying the night skies, and mapping out the stars. That was definitely one of Blaise's least favorite subjects. She thought it was insane to wake up in the middle of the night for schoolwork.

Luckily, she could always catch up on sleep in History of Magic. Binns, the only dead professor, taught that class. He had some kind of obsession with the goblin wars, something that could be very exciting with all the blood and violence. Unfortunately for them, he would only lecture the entire time in the same droning voice. It was sad the way he could make the gory beheading of General Ragnok sound about as interesting as the time he misplaced his boot.

Harry and Blaise weren't the only ones left in a kind of stupor during that period. More than one person could be found drooling on their bag, only to fall out of their seat when the bell rang.

Charms was the only other time they were permitted to use their wands. Professor Flitwick was teaching them how to levitate a feather. The incantation was '*Wingardium Leviosa!*' The spell was rather difficult, and even Harry was having some trouble with it. Despite his miraculous show in Transfiguration, he couldn't get that feeling to come back. Without it, he felt a lot like Blaise at the time. He felt as though he was waving around a big stick and yelling at a feather in gibberish.

This was one of the few subjects they had with the Gryffindors, and it wasn't going too well.

"No, not like that! You're saying it wrong! It's '*win-GAR-dium levi-O-sa*. You need to make the 'gar' nice and long..."

Harry groaned. The Gryffindors were at each others' throats again. He was starting to feel grateful he hadn't gone into that house, if only so he wouldn't need to listen to their bickering all the time. Weasley and Granger never gave it a rest!

He hadn't really spoken to Ron since the sorting; it was kind of hard to talk to someone that glared at you in the hallways, and made of point of announcing their loyalties on a daily basis. While the youngest Weasley seemed to feel betrayed that his idol was turning into the next dark lord, the Weasley twins were perfectly fine about it. When Harry and Blaise asked why, they said it was easier to prank them without remorse. After that, Harry had added hexes to the list of things to search for in the library, with a reminder about the protection charms.

"Oh, look, class! Miss Granger's done it!" Professor squeaked happily as the rest of the class watched her white feather drift lazily around the ceiling. She smiled in a self-satisfied way at Weasley, who just growled before returning to his own feather.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

The feather gave a half-hearted twitch on the desk before remaining still. Weasley groaned and threw down his wand angrily.

"I told you, you're supposed to say-" Granger began in a suffering tone.

"Oh, sod off!" He yelled, his face matching his hair color more by the second.

"Mr. Weasley, language!" Flitwick scolded.

Weasley was saved from a serious deduction in points when an explosion came from the table near Harry and Blaise.

Blaise coughed, waving away the smoke. Harry bit his lip to keep from laughing.

The Gryffindor nearby, Finnigan, had been getting more frustrated throughout the period with his own feeble attempts at the spell. The arguing from Granger and Weasley probably wasn't helping his concentration. Finally, he just shouted the incantation, jabbing his wand at the fragile feather... and setting it on fire. One had to wonder how he accomplished that... Maybe Harry would ask later... it could have its uses.

Flitwick scurried over, muttering a charm to clear the air. The rest of the class was too busy laughing as Finnigan reached up to feel the remains of his singed eyebrows.

Harry, Blaise, and probably the rest of the Slytherins, were relieved to leave Charms. It seemed to be a well-known fact that Gryffindor and Slytherin were mortal enemies. Any room filled with tension, and one could almost claim the temperature dropped a few degrees when the two warring houses were in close proximity. The rivalry they shared was legendary, dating back thousands of years to Godric Gryffindor and Salazar Slytherin themselves. It was something everyone knew of, and most made a point of avoiding... So Harry had to wonder what the headmaster was thinking when he put the two together in a dank dungeon for two hours straight.

When Harry and Blaise entered Potions, they took seats on the side of the room dedicated to the color green. It was like there was an invisible barrier declaring one side the territory of the snakes and the

other the lions. To cross that barrier was considered suicidal. The Gryffindors glared across the room while the Slytherins sneered in disdain. Not a word was spoken. The silence was finally broken when the door banged open and the greasy potions master himself swooped in, black robes billowing behind him.

'Oh, I was hoping he was still comatose,' Harry mentally whined, *'Is that too much to ask for?'*

Snape proceeded to call the roll, taking the time to observe the students. He glared at Weasley, whose return glare wasn't nearly as threatening. Longbottom squeaked in fear when his name was called. Granger was practically bouncing in her seat for the lesson to begin.

"That girl needs a sedative," Harry muttered discreetly to Blaise. She nodded in agreement while pointing out that Longbottom could use one too. Harry was silently rooting for the boy, who looked like he might faint. Maybe they could get out of class early?

Snape turned off his glare while addressing his Slytherins. He even gave a smirk to Draco Malfoy, who returned it, looking as though they were old friends.

"Teacher's pet," Harry hissed before getting a disturbing mental image of Snape playing with a puppy. It took all his self control not to crack up right there.

Potions was the best subject of all for Slytherins. Snape, as their head of house, favored them above all others. It meant easy grades and free house points, something the rest of the school hated them for. That was the way it had always been, that is, until Harry Potter became a Slytherin.

"Ah, yes," he sneered, "Harry Potter. Our new... celebrity," he left his desk and walked towards Harry and Blaise's table, "I can't see how you managed to get sorted into Slytherin. You probably just wanted the attention,"

Harry clenched his teeth, and tried to stay calm. The Slytherins watched the exchange curiously, while some of the Gryffindors dared to laugh. For perhaps the first time in history, Snape let them.

"Potter!" he barked.

Harry's eyes shot up and met the dark orbs defiantly.

"What would I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Harry's eyes widened in disbelief. How the hell was he supposed to know that?

Snape tutted, "Fine, let's try again. Where would you look if I told you to find me a bezoar?"

Behind Snape, Harry could see Granger straining out of her seat, her arm waving frantically.

"I'm not sure, but I think Granger has some idea."

Snape narrowed his eyes and told her to sit down, which she did with some reluctance.

"I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you didn't bother to open a book before coming here, Potter. Probably think you are above such things-

"No I don't," Harry interrupted in a quiet voice. Snape scowled at the interruption.

Blaise could see Harry's fisted hands shaking under their table. She touched his arm, offering what little support she could. Harry released a calming breath. *'If Snape wants to play games...'*

"Actually, *Professor*," he emphasized the title, indicating he meant to say something much more colorful, "I just bought those books, and I haven't passed chapter five yet, which, by the way, says nothing about those herbs."

Snape leered, "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Harry glared up at the man. Snape knew Harry couldn't tell anyone that he'd been at Hogwarts the last days of summer. Suddenly, he remembered something from early that week.

"Well, sir, if you'll look in the Daily Prophet, I believe there was an article about it," he pointed out innocently. For once, he was glad for reporters.

Snape scowled, "Five points from Slytherin, for your cheek! For your information, Potter, asphodel and wormwood make a sleeping draught so powerful it is known as the Drought of Living Death. A bezoar is a stone taken from the stomach of a goat and it will save you from most poisons. Why are you all just sitting there? Start copying this down!" he snapped and the class started rummaging for quills and parchment.

While Harry searched his bag, he could be heard muttering furiously about slimy gits.

"Hey, Harry," Blaise leaned over, whispering offhandedly, "I don't think he likes you too much."

Harry snorted. *'Note to self,'* he thought, *'Add revenge on Snape to things I need to research.'*

Harry heard snickering and looked up. Weasley was watching him and saying something to his friends, most likely about how it was only a matter of time before Snape tried to use him for potion ingredients.

'Make that revenge on Snape and Weasley.'

"Okay, let's see... 'The common Sleeping Draught: add two sprigs of nightshade, crushed. Stir into cauldron counter-clockwise, twenty-five times. Add in crushed salamander scales while stirring. Use a pinch of ginger root to neutralize the effects of the beetle eyes...' Blaise? Are you getting any of this?" Harry paused in his reading and put down the heavy tome.

Blaise looked up from her perch on the edge of an emerald green couch in the Slytherin common room. They were alone in the room with the dying fire, as most of their housemates had already gone to sleep. Half her body was slipping out of the cushion, and she held a blank parchment in limp fingers.

"Did you," Blaise yawned widely, "say something?" She blinked owlishly at him, leading Harry to believe that his friend wasn't quite all there.

"Blaise," Harry groaned in irritation, "We really need to get started on this! It's due next potions class!"

Blaise straightened in her chair, stretching, "C'mon, Harry. It's not due for two days! Bloody git, how can Snape assign us a three-foot essay on a potion we got right?" Blaise slammed her fist into the armrest for emphasis.

"Because he's a sadist?" Harry suggested with minimum sarcasm.

Potions had easily become Harry's least favorite subject at Hogwarts. He had known that he and Snape wouldn't get along, but he didn't take into account just how much the man hated him, a feeling that was now mutual. Getting into Slytherin had certainly unhinged the professor, and most of his classmates as well. Unfortunately, a little thing like house unity did nothing to change Snape's attitude toward him. For perhaps the first time in his teaching career, Professor Snape, the greasy, biased head of Slytherin, had taken points off his own house! This did nothing to improve Harry's standing with the other Slytherins.

After Snape gave his opening speech, he ordered the class to begin making a simple Sleeping Draught that, according to him, even a

dunderhead could accomplish. Here he looked pointedly at where Blaise and Harry were seated. The lesson passed in a relatively calm manner compared to the first five minutes. Harry found that he was somewhat adept at potions. The cooking skills he'd developed early in life were coming in handy when all he had to do was chop ingredients. Blaise, after nearly slicing off her own finger, was given the task of reading the directions to Harry while he focused on the cauldron. Things were safer that way. Their potion was slowly turning a light shade of blue as time passed. They were one of the many successful pairs on the Slytherin side of the room. The Gryffindors were having a little more trouble. Apparently, patience did not come with the supposed bravery in that house. Hermione Granger had obviously gotten it right, and Snape merely kept silent when he passed her table. He sneered at most of the Gryffindors, but stopped to praise his Slytherins. He wasted an entire ten minutes telling the class how *Draco* had gotten his potion a perfect, crystalline blue. Harry, whose potion was nearly identical, received a glare of contempt and was told that the color was off by several shades.

Soon Snape came to Neville Longbottom. Harry could already tell that boy was destined to rank right behind himself in Snape's list of least favorite students. His potion had somehow turned a bright, bubble gum pink, and it apparently had the same texture, as they reluctantly found out when it exploded, dousing more than half the students in the sticky goo.

"Foolish boy! I suppose you added the porcupine quills before you took it off the fire?" Snape snarled as Longbottom quivered under the pink slime. He would have fallen off his chair when Snape stalked closer, if not for the potion covering his robes that stuck him to it.

"Potter!"

The abrupt use of his name caused Harry to whip around in his seat, almost knocking over the cauldron.

"Huh?"

"Why didn't you tell him not to add the porcupine quills? Thought it would make you look good if he got it wrong? Five more points from Slytherin!"

The Slytherins gaped at their head of house and the unfair point deduction. The Gryffindors were just as confused at the man's logic. Harry just looked dumbly at the ten-foot distance between himself and Longbottom. How exactly did Snape expect him to watch how the boy did his work from all the way over there? He said as much, and lost another five points.

As the class trooped out of the dungeon when the bell rang, all fully intent on changing out of their dripping robes, Snape halted them and announced a three-foot paper for any who did not get the potion correct, including Harry and Blaise.

"That's it!" Blaise snapped, throwing down her quill in frustration.

Harry looked at the abused feather in amusement.

"Harry, I can't take this anymore! Let's just take a break, please?" she stuck out her lip and gave her friend the biggest set of puppy eyes her blue eyes could accomplish. It must have worked, for Harry laughed and tossed his textbook onto the table.

"Fine, a small break. So what do we do now?" Harry watched curiously as Blaise sat up excitedly, scrambling for parchment and a new, less crumpled quill.

She flopped into an armchair nearer to his own, and leaned over confidentially. Harry moved closer, listening intently.

"*Revenge*," she whispered, smiling deviously.

Harry and Blaise stayed up late that night, plotting the best way to make an impression on the school. One thing was for sure, Hogwarts wouldn't know what hit it. If any of the Slytherins had been awake that night, or had bothered to come down to the common room, they would have been highly disturbed, and more than a little scared by the sight of two junior snakes hunched over a sheet or parchment and cackling.

'Hex Your Enemies' came in very handy. They looked up several charms, anything that could be useful. Harry had already found

something called the Leg-Locker curse. Not to mention that Jelly-Legs jinx Blaise had discovered. Ooh, and was that an unlocking charm?

'Oh, the possibilities...' Harry thought, jotting down the incantation to that particular spell.

They had to plan this carefully. No one could know it was them when their first prank went off. They didn't want the teachers to get too suspicious this early. The list of hexes and jinxes was growing, taking up more parchment than any of their previous homework. As the night wore on, Blaise's eyes were constantly drooping, and Harry was losing track of which prank they had planned for who. When he mumbled something about stealing Snape's lemon drops, he decided to call it a night.

He bid Blaise farewell and they split up, climbing the stairs to their separate dorms. Harry passed by his dorm mates, observing the layout of the room. Crabbe and Goyle were spread out in their four-posters, their huge forms hanging off the bed. Theodore Nott slept with the hangings pulled shut, in a desperate attempt to block out their snores. Draco Malfoy lay in the middle of his bed, arms folded regally over his silk pajamas, his eyes covered. Harry himself changed into a pair of worn shorts and a t-shirt before settling under the covers. He shook his head bemusedly at Sneak, who was curled around the bedpost, his scales blending perfectly with the ebony wood.

None of his peers had noticed the snake yet, for which Harry was grateful. Though it was hard to when even Harry couldn't keep track of the small creature in the huge castle. Who knew where Sneak went all day? Harry wasn't worried. He always turned up eventually, usually when he was hungry.

As the rest of the school slept on peacefully, Harry was tossing and turning, caught in the throes of a nightmare.

It started out in a place Harry was all too familiar with. The cupboard under the stairs. He was four again, and his uncle had locked him in the cramped space for spilling Dudley's breakfast all over the kitchen

floor when his cousin tripped him. He was huddled on his cot in the dark when suddenly, the lock clicked and the door swung out. Little Harry pushed it open cautiously, peering around for his aunt or uncle.

Instead of the hallway of Number 4 Privet Drive, Harry stepped into the Great Hall. Hundreds of students were seated at the house tables, just like at the feast. The room was dark except for the floating candles, giving the faces an eerie glow. In the center of the hall was a rickety stool. On it sat the Sorting Hat. Harry walked forward, his footsteps echoing in the silence. He placed on the hat, waiting for it to speak. Instead, he felt the hat shudder. Harry pulled it off and found himself holding Professor Quirrell's purple turban. It gave another shudder, and Harry heard a faint whispering come from it.

"Harry..."

The lights in the Great Hall dimmed further. Harry could barely make out the head table. The last he saw was a glimpse of Snape's eyes, glittering in the darkness. The turban shook more violently, the whispers getting louder. Harry dropped it in fear, stumbling backwards. He watched it begin spinning, faster and faster. Abruptly it stopped. Harry crept closer, watching for any movement. Without any warning the turban exploded, and Harry was knocked back in a burst of green light. Cold, high laughter was the last thing Harry heard...

Harry shot up in bed, startling Sneak, who hissed and curled up tighter. Harry took a moment to control his breathing. Once his heart rate was back to normal, he turned over and pulled up the covers that had fallen to the floor at some point. He fell back asleep and remembered nothing of his dreams the next morning.

"Quidditch!"

"What-itch?" Blaise asked, blearily looking up from her oatmeal.

"*Quid-ditch*," Harry reiterated slowly. He smiled brightly and shoved a thick book entitled 'Quidditch Through the Ages' under her nose. He pointed at a picture of a wizard clad in bright orange robes, chasing a tiny winged ball.

"Harry, it's too early to be this perky..." Blaise groaned, pushing away the book in disgust. Unlike Harry, she was useless if she didn't get at least ten hours of sleep. It made her the obvious culprit whenever something happened.

"But, Blaise," Harry whined petulantly, "Today's our first flying lessons! I've been dying to try it! I can't wait! Do you think it will be hard? What if I totally suck at it? What if I fall off while I'm, like fifty feet in the air? What if-"

"Harry!" she barked in annoyance and slammed her spoon down on the table, startling a few of their peers at the outburst, "It'll be fine, I'm sure you're a natural... and if you don't bloody shut up, I am going to knock you off your broom myself!" Blaise screeched, waving her spoon warningly.

Harry sighed, and grabbed a napkin to wipe Blaise's breakfast off his glasses. He settled into his seat, completely ignoring the tantalizing smells coming from the table, and flipped through his book. Flying was the one part of the wizarding world that Harry was most anxious to try. After reading through at least half the text, he was itching to grab a broom. It was a real shame that first years weren't permitted to try out for their house teams.

The game itself looked a lot more complicated than any muggle sport. There were seven players per team. A keeper, three chasers, two beaters, and one seeker. Harry already knew that he would be at the practice trials next year. He just wondered what position he would play...

"C'mon, Blaise! Hurry up!" Harry tugged impatiently on his friend's arm as they and the rest of the Slytherin first years headed toward the quidditch pitch.

The morning was bright and sunny with a light breeze, and according to 'Quidditch Through the Ages', perfect flying conditions. They made their way towards the field, and Harry looked up at the tall scoring rings in excitement. The way he was acting, you'd think they'd just arrived at Disney World.

A dozen students with red and gold ties huddled by the stands impatiently. Harry pulled Blaise toward the crowd before she could object. It was becoming obvious that any time spent with the Gryffindors was a disaster waiting to happen. The opposing houses were already shooting each other murderous looks.

"Hey, Potter!" Harry turned around in surprise. Draco Malfoy was making his way toward them. What could he want?

Malfoy put on a sickening smile that didn't reach his eyes, "Look, we got off on the wrong foot last time, so let's start over. You already know my name, and these are Crabbe and Goyle," he tilted his head in the direction of his two cronies stationed behind him.

Harry nodded. Not taking his eyes off Malfoy, he tugged Blaise forward, "This is my friend, Blaise Zabini."

Malfoy looked her up and down with a smirk on his face, "A pleasure to meet you."

"Yeah," Blaise looked like she was dying to get on a broom already, if only to get far away from him.

"What do you think you're doing, Potter?"

Harry turned around again, and found himself face to face with an irate Ron Weasley.

'Is this going to be some sort of pattern today?' Harry grumbled inwardly, 'Now all we need is for Snape to show up, and my day should be complete...'

"Is there a problem?" Harry asked calmly.

"Of course, you're sucking up to your little snake friends!" *Weasley was just asking for it today...*

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm speaking to my house mates."

"You're consorting with Malfoy!" He pointed a shaking finger in the trio's direction, "His entire family is in league with You-Know-Who!"

Malfoy stepped forward and scowled, "You want to say that to my face?" from behind him, Crabbe cracked his knuckles threateningly.

"No need to ask who you are," he sneered, looking over him with distaste, "Red hair, freckles, and a hand-me-down robe... You must be a Weasley."

Ron snarled, his ears matching the familiar Gryffindor red.

"You see, Potter," Malfoy continued, ignoring Weasley, "Some wizarding families are better than others. You don't want to go making friends with the wrong sort. I can help you there," he held out his hand.

Harry looked between Malfoy's outstretched hand, and Weasley's clenched fists. He glanced back at Blaise, and some kind of understanding passed between them.

"No thanks, Malfoy. I think I can tell the wrong sort for myself."

Malfoy dropped his hand, and his pale cheeks flushed with anger. Weasley gave a whoop and smirked at him.

"And personally," Harry added, rolling his eyes at Weasley's antics, "I think you're both daft."

For once, both Malfoy and Weasley had something in common. They both did a perfect imitation of a goldfish out of water.

"Settle down, class! Settle down!" Madam Hooch, the flying instructor arrived, saving Harry from a decidedly gruesome fate. He could just see the headlines now: **'Boy-Who-Lived Mauled By Angry Peers'**

"Alright, everyone, this way!" she strode off, not waiting for the students. They followed her into the middle of the pitch where two rows of rather beat up brooms lay on the ground.

"Now," she addressed the students once they stood next to a broom, "Stick your right hand over the broom and say up!"

Shouts of 'UP!' rang out as they tried to control their brooms. Only a handful managed the desired results. Harry's broom jumped into his hand on the first try, and several feet away, Malfoy's broom did the same. Weasley stood over his broom, glowering as nothing happened. Like his feather in Charms class, it rolled over sleepily and proceeded to ignore him. Blaise glared at her own broom.

"Get up, you stupid twig!" she kicked the Cleansweep angrily.

"Blaise," Harry scolded, "What did the broom ever do to you?"

"Gee, you're right, Harry. I don't know what I was thinking," Blaise smiled sweetly at him. The second his back was turned, she pulled out her wand and jabbed it at the broom, "Okay, I don't like you, and you don't like me. But unless you want to become firewood, I suggest you get your lazy handle up!"

The broom gave a nervous twitch and jumped into her hand. When Harry turned back to Blaise, he found her holding her broom at last, and tucking something back into her robes.

"See, Blaise, I told you."

"Has everyone got a hold of their broom? Good, mount!" Madam Hooch stalked down the aisles, examining the students' seating. She was forced to correct several people, including Longbottom, who was facing the wrong end.

"Now, on my whistle, kick off hard!"

The class kicked off, Harry going the highest. It felt like he was born to do this. Somehow, he just knew that if he leaned forward, the broom would go faster, and it turned without a thought.

Madam Hooch explained the dynamics of flying, and once she was sure they could handle it, allowed them free reign. A few of the Gryffindors took off, playing tag. Some Slytherins raced each other

from one end of the pitch to the other. Harry soared above everyone, watching how they flew.

Weasley was hovering above the ground, bickering with Granger, of course. She was still sitting on the ground and seemed reluctant to take to the air. Instead, she had taken out a thick book similar to Harry's and was reading off step-by-step instructions on flying. The only one listening was Longbottom. He clutched his broom tightly, looking as though he was going to tip over any second.

A few feet below Harry was Blaise. She was floating by on her own broom and was... *arguing with it?* Suddenly, Pansy Parkinson flew over shakily. She started taunting Blaise about something. Harry wondered if he should intervene. That choice was taken from him when Blaise's broom shot forward, nearly unseating Pansy as she shrieked. Blaise halted her broom and patted it almost proudly. Harry shook his head in exasperation. He met the strangest people...

"Potter!" Malfoy stopped his broom in front of Harry.

'Oh, no, not him again...'

"Potter, how about a challenge?"

"What kind of challenge?" Harry asked suspiciously. He knew if Blaise were nearby, she would have told him to just back away slowly; but Harry was a very competitive person, and what Blaise didn't know didn't hurt her, just him when she found out.

"A simple game of chicken. You've heard of it right? I know those filthy muggles do something like it," Malfoy's eyes narrowed at just the mention of them, "All we do is fly straight down. First one to pull out of the dive loses. What do you say?"

Harry scanned the ground for Madam Hooch. She was trying to coax the book out of Granger's arms, a task that was proving difficult. She would be distracted for a while.

"Well, Potter?"

Harry looked at the drop. They were at least fifty feet high.

"You're on."

Malfoy and Harry positioned their brooms.

"On the count of three," Malfoy started, "One..."

'What am I doing?'

"Two..."

'Blaise is going to kill me.'

"Three!"

Both boys plunged. Gryffindors and Slytherins alike stopped whatever they were doing. They watched as the two boys sped straight toward the grass, neither showing any signs of slowing down.

Blaise looked up from praising her broom in shock, *'I'm going to kill him...'*

Weasley stared at the scene in confusion. He couldn't decide who he wanted to see hit the ground more.

Granger looked on in horror. What if Gryffindor lost points for not stopping them?

Longbottom was so absorbed in what was happening that he forgot to pay attention to his own broom. He was hit by a gust of wind, and toppled off.

Meanwhile, Seamus Finnigan was feeling very confident. He'd gotten his broom up in the air without any assistance. People made fun of him for his abysmal wand waving, but here was something he could do. He glided around the pitch oblivious to the excitement. Therefore, he was caught off guard when his roommate, Neville appeared out of nowhere, landing in his lap, and causing the broom to overbalance, tossing them both off.

Harry leaned into the handle of his broom, trying to dampen the wind resistance. The field was growing closer by the minute. From the

corner of his eye, he could see Malfoy coming even with him. Neither of them looked ready to back down. *Twenty more feet...* Harry wondered if he could even get the broom to stop at this speed. It would be rather ironic to have come this far only to crash. *Fifteen feet...* He could stop now, but then he would lose... *Ten feet...* and if there was one thing Harry couldn't stand, it was losing to a prat like Malfoy...

There were only seconds left. The onlookers held their breath. Harry kept an eye on Malfoy. He seemed to be having an inner debate. His face was screwed up in a mix of anger in fear. He shot a look at Harry that clearly said, *'Are you suicidal?'* before pulling out of the dive. *Five more feet...*

Harry felt a brief moment of triumph before he realized that he was still hurtling toward the ground. His eyes widened and he let instinct take over. Harry leaned back on the tail of the broom, pulling on the handle so hard it threatened to snap... *'C'mon...'*

Harry barreled over the field, his toes just brushing the turf. He was gasping for breath having forgotten to breathe. As he landed, he heard a roar of sound.

"Wha-"

That was all Harry got out before he was swarmed. All the students were running over to congratulate him. The Slytherins were cheering more loudly than he thought possible for such a gloomy lot. Even the Gryffindors were amazed. After all, bravery was a Gryffindor trait, and the Boy-Who-Lived was a Slytherin!

"That was amazing, Harry!"

"Brilliant, Potter!"

"Didn't know you Slytherins had it in you!"

"Can I have you're autograph?"

Harry looked dazedly at the pretty Gryffindor that was holding out a pen with a shy smile. Her friend, Lavender Brown, giggled hopelessly.

"Okay, people, show's over!" Blaise pushed the simpering girls out of the way with unveiled disgust. She growled at them when they wouldn't move. Harry gulped at the furious look in Blaise's eyes.

"Uh, hi," he waved a hand weakly.

Blaise stalked forward and whacked him with the tail of her broom.

"Ow!" Harry rubbed his head and glared at her. "What was that for?"

"That was for being an idiot!"

Then she gathered him in a choking hug. Harry was getting confused.

"That was for the look on Malfoy's face. It was priceless!"

A sharp blow from Hooch's whistle interrupted them.

"Alright, nice job, people. Class dismissed. Please place your brooms inside the cupboard by the locker rooms, and head back inside."

Madam Hooch walked off up to the castle, two limping Gryffindors right behind her. Finnigan and Longbottom were helping each other walk. Longbottom had an apologetic look on his face while Finnigan was scowling and holding the remains of a broom that had been snapped in half.

"Let's go, Blaise. Blaise?"

Harry paused and looked back at his friend. She was staring mournfully at her broom and held it tighter.

"Do I have to?" her bottom lip trembled at the thought of giving it up.

One look at Harry and she sighed, walking towards the storage room. As she placed it on the shelf, she gave it one last pat, "It was nice working with you."

"Tempus,"

A luminescent green smoke drifted out of the tip of Harry's wand, forming numbers as he squinted in the dark dormitory. It read 12:45. *'Perfect,'* He thought as he waved his wand, causing the smoke to dissipate.

Harry parted the emerald curtains blocking off his bed, and glanced at the other inhabitants of the room. Finally, they were all asleep. He took one last look at the snoozing lump nearest the door before sliding out from under the covers, fully dressed in his muggle clothes, and slipping on his shoes. He straightened his glasses and checked that his wand was still in his back pocket.

Quietly, with the skill obtained from years of practice, Harry opened the door just enough to squeeze through, and crept down the staircase. He moved quickly across the abandoned common room, intent on the adjacent path to the girls' rooms.

Harry looked up the winding stairs. He'd never actually been in Blaise's room, which was odd considering how often he visited her in the night at St. Margaret's. After all, it was Harry's unspoken duty to wake his friend up if he ever planned to get anything done.

Harry climbed up the stone steps, careful not to let his shoes squeak. The last thing he needed was for the rest of the Slytherins to discover Harry Potter sneaking into a girls' dormitory. He had just reached the door labeled First Years, when it happened.

As Harry was just turning the silver doorknob, he heard a strange grinding noise, similar to the when one of the Hogwarts staircases decided to change...

'Uh-oh,' was Harry's last thought before the floor beneath him tilted, the stairs molding together into one huge slide. He scrambled to grab onto the banister, but missed, causing him to skid backwards all the way back down to the common room. He landed with a low thump, colliding with one of the low tables scattered around the room.

"Urgh," Harry groaned, rubbing his stinging head where he'd hit it on the table, "This is really going to interfere with things..."

He looked up when he heard a yawn coming from the meddlesome stairs.

"That 'choo, Harry?" Blaise shuffled out of her room, rubbing her eyes tiredly.

"Blaise, watch out for-"

Before he could warn her, Blaise walked forward, only to meet with air where there should have been solid stone. She squeaked in dismay, now wide-awake, before tumbling down face forward.

"Harry, you idiot," she mumbled from the carpet.

"Hey, it's not my fault the entire school is against me," he grumbled while giving her a hand up.

"Actually, it is. Boys can't go near the girls' sleeping quarters apparently."

"What? But you've been in my room plenty of times!" Harry said, referring to just that morning, when she had chosen to wake him up by pouring cold water on his head.

"One of the prefects told me. It's some old rule. The founders didn't trust the boys to keep to themselves."

"Stupid founders... You know the girls are just as bad... That Pansy's always around, clinging to Malfoy... Love to see *her* thrown down the stairs..." Harry muttered indignantly as they walked out the entrance to the Slytherin common room.

He looked back at the blank stretch of wall as they left, remembering his first couple days of wandering the dungeons in search of the passageway. It was bad enough remembering the password when you couldn't even find the nearly invisible portal. Of course, it was pretty funny to watch Malfoy and his bodyguards stand in front of the

wrong wall, yelling at it until a prefect came along, pointing him in the correct direction.

Harry and Blaise made their way toward the potions classroom, keeping an eye out for any teachers. Some of them liked to patrol the halls in the middle of the night, waiting to catch any student up to no good. Add that to the numerous prefects from the different houses, plus Filch, and the ghosts... Let's just say it wasn't easy. It was at times like these that Harry wished he knew a spell to turn himself invisible. The closest he could find was a disillusionment spell, which unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to accomplish until N.E.W.T. year.

As a result, both Blaise and Harry were extra careful to check around the corners before every turn. They were almost intercepted by Peeves, the trouble-making poltergeist who was currently stirring up his own form of mischief in an empty classroom. They skirted past the open door quickly before hurrying on their way. It was a known fact that wherever Peeves was, Filch wouldn't be far behind.

They reached Snape's classroom in more time than Harry would have liked, at least twenty minutes. They were in luck when they found the door unlocked. Well, actually, while Harry was held back for a 'talk' with his professor about the explosion his potion caused when Malfoy 'accidentally' dropped something in it, Blaise waited for him in the hallway, courteously holding open the door for her peers; and while holding said door, she nonchalantly put a piece of tape over the lock. Like Harry always said, 'When all else fails, do it the muggle way.'

Harry ducked inside, Blaise right behind him.

"Lumos," she whispered, lighting the tip of her wand. Harry followed suit.

They walked past the empty desks and around a questionable green stain on the floor, stopping at the door to Snape's supply room. Once inside, Harry used the golden glow from his wand to observe the ingredients bottled on the shelves.

"Eeeeww, this place is even creepier at night," Blaise commented, backing away from the jars in revulsion, "I don't see how Snape can stand it."

"Well, he is a pretty creepy guy," Harry responded while inspecting a bag labeled dragon liver, "C'mon, let's get this over with."

Blaise nodded, her face scrunched up in disgust as she lifted several containers off the rack, holding them as far away as possible.

One by one, they pulled off the labels on the ingredients with a simple unsticking charm. Carefully, so as not to make it noticeable, they replaced them, but on the wrong ones. It was a simple prank, and a little juvenile, but hey, Snape deserved it.

As a final touch, Harry pulled something out of his pocket. It was one of Dr. Filibuster's Fabulous Wet-Start, No-Heat Fireworks, and in two lovely shades of gold and red. It was something Harry had found in the mail order catalogue he grabbed in Diagon Alley. Unlike the muggle kind, these fireworks went off in water, i.e. a cauldron full of boiling liquid. He unscrewed the top on something labeled 'Hellebore'.

Harry took the wrapping off the firework and slipped it in the jar, letting it sink into the sticky syrup. Once he was sure it couldn't be seen at first glance, he closed the jar, replacing it on the shelf. Snape was going to get one hell of a surprise when he used that.

"Ok, Harry, I'm all done," Blaise said, wiping her hands on her jeans as she stood up, "Can we please go back to sleep now?"

"Aww, c'mon! The night is still young, Blaise!" Harry looked at her pleadingly. The truth was, he'd been having a lot of strange dreams lately, about green light and chilling laughter. Harry always woke from those nightmares drenched in cold sweat with his scar burning. He would forgo sleep altogether if he could.

Blaise looked at her anxious friend suspiciously, "All right, so what do you suggest we do?" Harry looked at her, a mischievous sparkle in his eye.

Blaise backed up nervously, "Uh-uh, Harry! Whatever you're thinking, I want no part of it!"

"But, Blaise, you don't even know what I have in mind!" Harry pouted.

"Yeah, but I know you, which means it's probably something that could get us killed, or worse, expelled!"

"Pleeeassse?" Harry asked pleadingly.

Blaise looked at her best friend's face. He seemed desperate, and he had asked nicely... Blaise sighed in defeat, *'I know I'm gonna regret this in the morning.'*

"You can't be serious!" Blaise screeched in the empty hallway. She tried to continue her ranting, but it was muffled by Harry's hand over her mouth.

"Shhh! Do you want to get us caught? And I'm completely serious," Harry added.

"Harry," Blaise whispered furiously, "The third-floor corridor is *forbidden*. I told you what Dumbledore said-"

"I know, I know. I just wanted to see what's so important there. Think of this as an adventure!"

"Adventure my-" Blaise swore violently, "Besides, Gryffindors are the foolishly brave ones. We're Slytherins, remember?" she asked slowly, as though talking to a toddler, "That means we have some sense of self-preservation! The headmaster said this place was off-limits on pain of death!" she hissed.

"Well, it's kind of hard to take death threats seriously from a guy walking around in fuchsia robes covered with twinkling stars."

"Hey, I thought those were nice-"

Harry stopped her when they arrived at the same entrance he'd found on the first day. He pushed aside a heavy tapestry and beckoned to his friend to follow.

The corridor was pitch black and they were forced to relight their wands. Harry held his up high, shedding light on the dusty floor. The hall was empty except for a few vacant paintings. Blaise shuddered as they walked by a looming statue covered in cobwebs. It was totally silent as they walked, their footsteps muffled by the layer of filth.

"What do you think this place was for?" Blaise whispered. She made a valid point. There weren't many classrooms this cut off from the rest of the school.

"I dunno, maybe-" Harry froze, listening, "Did you hear that?"

"No-" she took a step forward.

"REEEEOOOOWWW!"

Blaise jumped at least a foot in the air, panting heavily with her hand on her chest. Harry was staring at the floor in horror. There, cradling her injured tail and spitting angrily at Blaise was Mrs. Norris.

He looked up at Blaise, still in shock, but he quickly realized something; they had to leave, now!

He grabbed Blaise's wrist, and she didn't protest as he started running. They had just ducked behind a moth-eaten curtain when they heard wheezing and heavy footsteps.

"Someone is out of bed," a voice cackled evilly, "Show me where there are, my sweet."

Harry's heart was beating wildly as he kept running, Blaise right behind him. They could hear Mrs. Norris yowling as she trotted faithfully towards them, leading Filch as he shuffled along.

Eventually, they came to a dead end. They were faced with a giant oak door, with the sound of Filch and his demon cat coming closer. Harry tugged on the handle frantically. It was locked.

"We are so screwed..." Blaise whimpered.

"No we're not," Harry replied, sounding as though he was trying to reassure himself as well.

'Think, Harry, think... What was it again?'

Harry pointed his wand at the lock, "*Alamara!*"

Nothing happened. Blaise looked at Harry with a raised eyebrow.

"Wait, that's not it," he muttered to himself, "*Alahoma! Alohalama! Amoraloha!*" A flash of purple sparks accompanied each attempt, but nothing worked, and Harry was growing frustrated.

Blaise wasn't doing much better. She was twisting her hands and looking around at the deserted corridor as though hoping for a miracle.

"Ohhh, c'mon," Harry moaned at the still-locked door. How could he forget such an important charm, *'What was it?'*

Harry turned toward the oncoming glow from Filch's lantern in despair.

"Alohomora?" he whispered hopelessly.

Both Harry and Blaise were taken by surprise when they heard a soft 'click' and the door behind them swung inward, dumping them on the floor. They jumped back up and shut the door hurriedly. Harry pressed his ear to the wood, listening intently.

There was a scratching at the door, and he leapt back at the sight of a furry paw scrabbling under the door. They heard another body come to the door, and the appendage was pulled out.

"No, no, Norrie. Can't go in there. Now where did those brats get to?"

A crash came from somewhere beyond the door, followed by insane cackling.

"Peeves! I'll have you now! Come, Mrs. Norris!" Filch's voice faded as he rushed away.

"Phew!" Blaise let out a breath she didn't even realize she was holding, "That was close!"

"Yeah, I don't want to know what would have happened if he'd found us down here," Harry agreed.

"This is all your fault, you know! I told you we shouldn't have come! It was all a waste of time anyway. There's nothing here. I wonder why this door was locked..." Blaise stopped when she realized she was the only one participating in the conversation, "Harry? Earth to Harry... What are you doing?"

Harry was staring behind Blaise with a look of fear on his face.

"What-" Blaise started.

"Don't make any sudden movement," Harry whispered, inching backwards, his hand groping for the door.

"Huh? Why are you-" Blaise turned around just in time to hear a low growling noise.

"Bugger, now we know why this door was locked..." she joked weakly.

They were in a large room with no windows, and sitting on the floor was the sole occupant, a monstrous canine, with THREE heads. It looked to be just waking up from a nap, and neither head seemed happy to find intruders in their territory. The middle one growled, revealing a set of fangs dripping with saliva that sizzled when it came into contact with the floor.

Blaise gulped, "Nice, doggy..."

The creature stood up on its four legs and stalked forward, all six eyes focused on Blaise. She trembled, paralyzed with fear as she watched it come closer. The head on the left shot forward, jaws gaping... and it snapped shut where Blaise had been only seconds before.

She felt a sharp tug on the back of her shirt, and Harry dragged her out of the room, slamming the door in the dogs' faces.

"Pureblood!" Harry gasped at the stone wall, for once, not stopping to roll his eyes at the password. The duo had run all the way back regardless of the consequences.

They climbed inside the common room and collapsed on a sofa, pale as ghosts and too stunned to speak.

"Bloody hell!" Blaise said at last, perfectly summing up the evening.

She jumped out of her seat, pacing as she continued her rant, "What's Dumbledore thinking, keeping a thing like that in a school-"

"Maybe he isn't," Harry interjected, even though he knew Blaise wasn't listening.

"Is he insane?"

"Probably."

"We could have been killed! That's the last time I let you talk me into going on any more 'adventures'!" she finished, glaring at Harry.

Harry rested his head in his hand as he frowned thoughtfully, "Did you see what it was standing on?"

"What?" Blaise screeched, slightly hysterical, "I wasn't looking at it's feet, I was kinda preoccupied with its heads! In case you didn't notice, there were three of them!"

"It was standing on a trap door..." Harry continued, ignoring her outburst.

"That's it!" Blaise shook her head wearily, "I don't know why I put up with you..."

"Cause 'ya love me," Harry replied cheekily.

She through up her hands in defeat before stomping up the restored staircase to her waiting bed.

Severus Snape sighed deeply over the bubbling cauldron. It was still rather early, and he was sure he could hear the sounds of breakfast in the Great Hall from here, though he had no desire to join them. To him, there was nothing more calming than brewing a difficult potion. It was one of the reasons he'd agreed to take on the position as Potions teacher. He was given his own lab, and funds to complete his research. It would be heaven, if not for the numerous brats he was paid to teach. He didn't see the point. It wasn't like any of them could really appreciate the beauty of a softly simmering potion; and most of them were too thick to bring water to a boil.

Snape was in the process of making an intricate calming potion, 'The Draught of Peace', something he didn't even attempt teaching the students until their fifth year. While it was usually his duty to restock the Hospital Wing for each time one of those imbecilic children made a mess of themselves, this potion was for his own use.

A sedative was what he was in dire need of after a double period with first years. Every year, it seemed the turnout got worse. Did parents teach their children nothing? No, they left it up to him to instill some knowledge into their otherwise impenetrable skulls.

To make matter worse, Albus had done the unthinkable. He entrusted a room full of mortal enemies to his tutelage. Those Gryffindors would be the death of him. It wouldn't be long before Longbottom caused a big enough explosion to take out half of the dungeons, and maybe put Snape out of his misery.

And another Weasley! Really, did Arthur and Molly ever give up? After the terrible twins made their presence known, Snape was ready to send a petition to the ministry about controlling the populace. Those two made Peeves seem like a guardian angel!

His Slytherins were all that kept him together at that school, reminding him why he put up with it. They looked up to him for guidance, and it was just so amusing to watch them torment the other houses. Minerva was always getting complaints about the older years bullying her precious cubs. But like any good Slytherin, his students always covered their tracks.

Oh, but this year... He'd been forced to take points from his own house. All because of that Potter! The manipulative little brat had somehow tricked the sorting hat just to spite him!

Bloody boy was as arrogant as his father! His status as celebrity only made it worse. James Potter had always made Snape's school years a living hell, him and his cohorts, *'the marauders, how fitting...'* The newest Potter was traipsing around with a Zabini, *'Strange, considering whom her parents were...'*

As Snape scowled at the worktable, he lost track of his potion, too consumed by the desire to blast something. He growled as he reached for the next ingredient, realizing it wasn't there. Turning down the flame, he stalked toward the cupboard. Snape skirted the remains of a green puddle. He sneered, *'Courtesy of the Weasley twins...'*

Reaching the door, he pulled it open, and began sorting through the jars. He ran his finger along the top shelf, muttering aloud the names as he read them, "Ah, here it is, Hellebore."

He turned back to his potion, robes billowing in irritation. Snape reread the passage in his book, *'Pour the Hellebore directly into the cauldron, stir counter-clockwise, until liquid turns a pale violet color...'*

He unscrewed the lid on the jar, and emptied the contents into the draught, never noticing a flash of red. It sunk into the mixture as he began stirring, oblivious to the way it bubbled ominously.

Snape turned back to the dusty potions manual, rereading the directions one last time. Finally, the potion was almost done. Now he just had to wait for it to cool, then he could bottle it up. A strange gurgling caught his attention, and he stared at the potion in confusion. The liquid was hissing and spitting, something that had never happened to the potions master in his years of brewing. He leaned over the cauldron, *'Were those sparks?'*

This all seemed very familiar, bringing to mind an incident in his first year teaching the Weasley twins. Realization dawned on him, and he backed away in horror...

"BOOM!"

"Mmmm, coffee. What would I do without you?" Harry sighed deeply into his steaming cup at breakfast the next morning.

Blaise wrinkled her nose distaste, "How can you drink that stuff?"

Harry took another sip before answering, "Practice. Besides, if I didn't, I'd look as run down as you."

"Thanks a lot," Blaise said in a dry voice.

A rush of wings filled the hall, heralding the arrival of the students' mail. Harry put down his mug and checked his sleeve.

Sneak had insisted on staying with Harry since he was left behind in the dormitory, and one of the house elves found him while they were cleaning. The unsuspecting elf had tried to dispose of Sneak, and was nearly strangled for his efforts. A few words from Harry had convinced the eager-to-please servant not to tell anyone.

So now, Harry had to tote the snake around to classes, which became more cumbersome every day. Already, he'd been forced to restrain Sneak during the morning owl post, when he spotted an old acquaintance. It appeared the eagle owl from Diagon Alley that tried to eat him had found a master. He was now the property of Draco Malfoy. As if Harry didn't have enough problems with his housemates, now he had to make sure his familiar didn't try to kill Malfoy's.

Harry was startled when a snowy owl landed beside his breakfast.

"Hedwig!" Harry had hardly seen his new owl since school started. It wasn't like she had any mail to deliver to him anyway.

"What are you doing here?" he asked as she helped herself to his food, "Other than stealing my bacon..."

Amber eyes looked up at him reproachfully, a half-eaten strip dangling from her beak. Hedwig ruffled her feathers importantly and held up her leg, proudly displaying a scroll tied to it.

Harry took the letter from her curiously, unable to recognize the untidy scrawl. Blaise leaned closer to read over his shoulder.

Dear Harry, and Blaise if you're there,

If you have some free time, would you like to come down for a cup of tea this afternoon? I want to hear all about your classes. Send me an answer back with your owl.

Hagrid

"What do you say?" Harry turned to Blaise questioningly.

She nodded emphatically, "Sure, we've got nothing better to do."

"What about that essay for McGonagall?" Harry asked, already knowing the answer.

"Like I said, nothing better to do."

Harry pulled a scrap of parchment out of his bag to write a quick note too Hagrid. He frowned when he didn't find his quill.

"Hey, Blaise, do you have a quill I could borrow?"

She rummaged in her bag before handing one over. Harry turned it over in his hands, not missing the way half the feather was plucked out and a piece of spell-o-tape held the broken stem together.

"You really need to stop taking your frustrations out on your quills. Two words, Blaise, 'anger management'," his friend only snorted in reply. Harry sighed at his own futile attempt before dipping the quill in his inkwell.

Dear Hagrid,

Thanks for the invite. We'll be by later this afternoon.

Harry

Harry blew on the message to dry it, before rolling it up and tying it to Hedwig as she perched on the table patiently.

"Thanks, Hedwig," Harry gave her a thankful pat and she nibbled his finger affectionately.

Jealous hissing came from Harry sleeve and Sneak poked his head out, glaring at the owl.

"Yeah, great job, winged mailbox. Now fly away, bird brain."

Hedwig twittered angrily in return as Harry tried to stifle the irate serpent. People were starting to give him funny looks down the table. It didn't help that his owl was one step away from pecking his sleeve in a murderous rage. She gave a smug hoot, and Harry could have sworn she was sneering.

Sneak reared back as though slapped, *"Who are you calling an overgrown flobberworm? Get lossst, you snarky pigeon!"*

"Sneak! That's no way to speak to Hedwig," Harry scolded.

Hedwig chirped amusedly when Sneak sputtered indignantly.

Harry turned to his owl, "The same goes for you, girl. You guys are going to be seeing a lot of each other. You may as well get along."

Harry sighed when both of his pets continued bickering as though they hadn't heard him. It finally ended when Hedwig left to deliver the note to Hagrid. Harry was starting to get a headache. Sneak kept muttering from his sleeve.

"Sstupid bird. Why don't I ever get bacon?" The last part was directed at Blaise as he was giving Harry the cold shoulder.

Blaise's face took on a pitying expression while concealing her amusement, "Here you go, Sneak," she said, taking the last of Harry's food and slipping it under the table.

"Hey! You're going to spoil him-" Harry paused midway when his brain caught up with what had just happened.

"Blaise!"

"What?" she looked in confusion at her gaping friend.

"You-you heard Sneak!" The aforementioned snake glanced up at his name, still trying to unhinge his jaws wide enough to swallow the food whole.

"No, I didn't."

"But-how did you know he wanted bacon?" Harry asked, trying not to stare at the snake in his lap. Watching Sneak eat was making him lose his appetite.

Blaise rolled her eyes, "I didn't, it just seemed like a good idea. Besides, everyone likes food," she pointed out, watching Sneak munch contentedly.

"Blaise," Harry said, eyeing her, "You're a very unique person..."

"Thanks," she said, not sure if she should be offended or not.

Their conversation was put on hold when the doors to the Great Hall banged open. When Harry saw the cause of the disturbance, he was hard pressed not to fall off his seat. Professor Snape marched toward the Gryffindor table, robes billowing. His wand was clenched so tightly in his fist it was in danger of snapping. It was easy to see what had the man so upset.

Snape's black robes were singed and still smoking, his face covered in black soot, but the main reason for his fury could be that over the obvious remains of an explosion, he was covered in brightly colored sparkles. His normally greasy hair was puffed up comically, red and gold streaks running through it. His robes were splattered with varied splotches of color as well. Over all, he greatly resembled the McDonald's clown.

Snape reached his destination at the house table when he paused in front of two red-haired students. The twins stared up at him, torn between laughing and running screaming at the expression on his face.

Snape glared down at them, practically seething, "WEASLEY!"

The twins glanced at each other and then up at Snape, "We didn't do it!"

The rest of the hall watched as the two Gryffindors were dragged bodily from the hall by their fuming professor. The second the door slammed shut behind him, the entire school roared with laughter.

The Slytherins failed to hold in their snickers at their head of house's appearance. Some just cracked up at the thought of what he would do to the idiots that pranked him. The other three houses couldn't contain themselves after the sight of their most feared teacher looking like a deranged clown. Even Neville Longbottom let loose a few giggles.

The teachers' reactions were the most humorous. Professor Flitwick had toppled off his chair, joining more than one student on the floor. The strict McGonagall tried and failed to get the children to settle down, resigning herself to waiting it out as she controlled her twitching lips. The headmaster chuckled along with the rest of them, slightly pitying his potions teacher, and wondering if Messrs. Fred and George make it through detention with all their body parts intact. He let his twinkling gaze wander over to the Slytherin table where he observed Mr. Potter holding onto Miss Zabini as they howled with mirth.

Harry gasped as he tried to control his breathing. That was one mental picture that would stick with him for life. It would be difficult to keep a straight face the next time he saw Snape. Who knew their first prank would go off so well? He never expected it to happen so soon. He thought about the Weasleys, snickering at how easily those two had been framed. All it took was the wrong house colors. They would learn not to underestimate the duo again.

As he looked around the Great Hall, he met the penetrating blue gaze at the head table. It was obvious that Dumbledore suspected who the real culprits were. He gave a small wink, surprising Harry, who returned it with a nod. The serious moment passed, and Harry's face split in a grin as he toppled off the bench at last.

That afternoon, Harry and Blaise made their way across the grounds, still reminiscing about the show at breakfast. They'd caught a glimpse of Professor Snape, back to his usual slimy self. They could hear him berating the Weasley twins as they passed, and the sound followed them until they left the dungeons. It was rumored the two had gotten detention with Filch for the next two weeks. Snape had originally planned on a month scrubbing cauldrons with him, but Dumbledore intervened, saving the twins from the teacher's wrath.

Fred and George Weasley were considered heroes among the other students, revered in their own house. That wasn't exactly what Harry had planned on, but he supposed it was enough to ease his conscience. After all, he spent enough time in Snape's presence; any punishment would have been ten times worse if the man discovered Harry and Blaise had actually broken into his classroom.

As they hiked down the lawn, they finally caught sight of a hut with a pointed roof near the edge of the forbidden forest. A pumpkin patch was on the left side, currently occupied by several chickens. Harry and Blaise walked around to the door and knocked. They heard someone moving inside and an animal whining.

"Down, boy, back!"

The door was finally opened, and they were greeted by Hagrid as he struggled to hold something back, "'Lo there, you two. Was wonderin' when you'd get here."

He beckoned them inside. Hagrid's home was interesting to see. It was rather cramped for someone his size, with a table in the center of the one room, and a gigantic bed pushed into the corner. Different cages hung from the rafters, along with animal skins of varied size.

"Can I offer yeh a cuppa?" Hagrid asked as he moved toward the stove.

"Sure, Hagrid, thanks-" Harry was interrupted by a scream from Blaise. He twisted around, wand at the ready, only to fall down laughing.

Blaise scowled at him from the floor where she was being 'attacked' by a boarhound that was attempting to lick her to death.

"Relax, Blaise. Tha's on'y Fang," Hagrid rumbled as he lifted the slobbering dog off her with ease. Fang whined at the loss of his new friend until Harry began petting him.

"Sorry," Blaise blushed as she stood, scrubbing her face dry on her robes. "I mistook him for something else," she explained as she accepted a cracked mug of tea.

"Oh, don' tell me yer afraid of dogs?"

"No, only ones with multiple heads," Blaise muttered as she shuddered at the thought.

Hagrid almost dropped the steaming kettle in shock, "How did yeh know abou' Fluffy?"

Harry choked on his tea, "*Fluffy?*"

"Yeah, he's mine, bought 'im off a Greek chappie I met in the pub las' year. Lent him to Dumbledore to guard the..." Hagrid trailed off. Paling, he mumbled, "Wasn't supposed ter tell yeh that..."

Harry and Blaise exchanged a look. Hagrid knew something, and he wasn't telling on Dumbledore's orders.

"How are yer classes goin'? Oy, do you have all yer homework done?" he asked suddenly, trying to act stern.

Harry frowned. Hagrid was trying to change the subject again. The same thing had happened when they were in Gringotts... Hagrid had taken something from vault 713. In fact, hadn't there been a break in the same day? However, nothing was taken because the vault had already been emptied... Fluffy, the trapdoor, the mysterious package that someone was trying to steal... It was all connected!

Hagrid shifted uncomfortably under the stares the two Slytherins were giving him, "*Why couldn't he just keep his mouth shut?*"

"Don't try to change the subject!" Blaise snapped, not wanting to answer that question.

"Hagrid," Harry asked slowly, "Do you know something? What is Fluffy doing on the third floor anyway?"

"Nuh-uh, I'm not sayin' anythin'. You already know too much. Jus' leave it alone. This is between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel..."

"Ah-ha!" Blaise shouted triumphantly, "So there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, eh?"

Hagrid bury his face in his hands, groaning. Finally, he looked up, a strange glint in his eye, "Look, you two didn't hear anythin'. Got it?"

"But-" Harry protested.

"You didn't hear anythin', and I didn't hear that you were snoopin' around in the forbidden corridor past yer curfew," he finished, beard twitching slightly.

Harry and Blaise gaped at their friend.

"Hagrid!" Blaise gasped.

"I didn't know you could be so-so Slytherin!" Harry looked at the giant with wide eyes, but he couldn't hide the fact that his respect for Hagrid had just risen a few notches... even if he couldn't keep a secret to save his life.

Harry held out a hand formally, "Don't worry, we'll just forget this conversation ever happened.

"Hmph," Hagrid made a show of looking up at the old clock on the wall, "Well, look at the time! Shouldn't you two be gettin' along now? Don't want ter be caught out after hours..."

"Of course!" Harry pulled Blaise out of her chair before she could argue, waving cheerily to Hagrid.

Blaise finally turned to Harry when they were out of earshot, "Harry, what just happened? Are we just gonna give up like that?"

"Of course not," Harry snorted.

"But you said-"

"I had my fingers crossed," Harry smirked at Blaise's incredulous expression.

"Very mature, Harry," she said wryly.

"Hey, you do wanna know what's going on, don't you?"

"Definitely," she said without hesitation.

"Well, then we have some research to do."

"Great, more homework," Blaise sighed, "There goes the weekend."

"Hey, would you rather go back and visit Fluffy. I'm sure he gets lonely up there..." he offered teasingly.

"Hell no!"

The following week, Harry and Blaise found themselves back in the dungeons for another period of torture. Snape was as much of a git, if not more so, than ever. His brief time as the Gryffindor mascot had left its mark on the school. The lesson was disrupted several times when a soft snicker was heard, resulting in the loss of a total of fifty points from Gryffindor, even if a few of those laughs came from the green and silver half of the room. Harry and Blaise were cautious not to say a word, but that didn't stop Snape from looking down his nose at their Pepper-Up Potion and handing out extra homework.

The potions master was taunting Longbottom to tears over his own potion, which had turned a nasty shade of yellow, complete with noxious fumes, when Ron Weasley raised a tentative hand. Despite his Gryffindor pride, or arrogance, as Harry liked to call it, the boy had

the sense to tread softly when the potions master's patience was clearly at the end of its tether.

"Er, Professor?" he asked uncertainly when Snape ignored him.

"What!" the man snapped, not in the mood for pointless questions.

"Um, I ran out of armadillo bile, can I go get some more from the cupboard?" Weasley looked as though he wished he'd kept quite for the rest of the class at the glare Snape sent him.

"Fine, but hurry up, and touch nothing else!" Snape turned on his heel, striding to his desk and sitting down.

Weasley nodded before jumping out of his seat and weaving around the tables toward the back of the room. He came back quickly, a small bottle in his hand.

Harry had perked up when Snape mentioned the storage cupboard that he had yet to check for further tampering. He watched through narrowed eyes as Weasley carried the ingredient back to his cauldron.

He had never thought about the possibility of someone other than Snape needing something after he'd switched around all the labels. Most students refilled their potion kits before the start of the year, containing all the basic ingredients. Well, this would be interesting... If he remembered correctly, the jar labeled armadillo bile was actually essence of belladonna, a highly potent substance in even the smallest amounts. *Yes, contrary to what Snape believed, Harry did read his potions text.*

He nudged Blaise, who was once again reading the directions from the book until Harry deemed it safe to let her near sharp objects. She glanced up, eyes half glazed in boredom at the monotony of the paragraph. He pointed discreetly to Weasley as he popped the cork out of a vial with one of Snape's personal labels. Both of them blanched when Weasley carelessly dumped a good third of the bottle into his potion, not even bothering to measure it out.

The potion began to hiss, attracting the attention of the Gryffindors around Weasley. Granger was the first to notice that the liquid's color

was completely off, and opened her mouth to tell him so. Before she got the chance, Weasley's cauldron began to droop. Faster than anyone could blink, the entire thing collapsed, the potion eating through the pewter like acid.

A couple girls in the vicinity screamed as the violent liquid spread across the floor, burning holes in the shoes of those not quick enough to move. The Slytherin side grinned maliciously at the Gryffindors as Snape stood up from his chair, a thunderous expression on his face that promised pain, mentally if not physically. The students on the other side of the room soon realized they weren't safe as the bubbling pool spread across the stone floor. Harry had the brains to climb onto the table, giving Blaise a hand up as well. The others followed his example once they stopped panicking.

Twenty minutes later, Harry surveyed the disarray of the room from his perch. His classmates were huddled on the desks, trying not to knock over their own class work. Snape had managed to halt the progression of the potion when he cleared it away with a powerful '*Evanesco*'. The once smooth stone floor now looked like a sinkhole, much to the displeasure of their teacher. He had then screamed himself hoarse at Weasley and taken more points from Gryffindor, and another ten from Harry for not stopping the disaster. This was Snape's usual ire at Harry's existence and nothing more, but if only he knew how close to the truth he was...

When the bell finally rang, the students couldn't get away fast enough. As Harry walked towards the Great Hall with Blaise, listening to her chatter, he couldn't help but think, '*A job well done.*'

Severus Snape remained in his office as the children scurried out the door. He sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose in irritation. As he scuffed a boot against the melted floor, he had one thought in mind, '*I need to go remake that calming potion...*'

"This is hopeless! He's not here!" Blaise slammed the book shut in frustration, and let her head fall onto the table with a thump.

"I know how you feel, Blaise, but I'm not giving up yet. Flamel has to be here somewhere..." Harry trailed off, groaning at the sheer number of books they had yet to search through in the school library.

Harry and Blaise had been scanning the dusty volumes for hours. Nicolas Flamel wasn't listed under 'F', though Harry couldn't expect it to be that easy. Nor was he anywhere in 'Famous Witches and Wizards of Modern Times'. It might have helped if they knew why Flamel was involved. For all they knew, he could be anything from an auror to a house elf. Unfortunately, it wasn't like they could just ask Dumbledore. Harry could already picture that conversation, *'Hi, Professor Dumbledore? We were just wondering... Why is there a vicious three-headed dog locked in the school, and what does your old pal Flamel have to do with it?'*

"What do you think you're doing!" a voice screeched through the silence. Harry flinched at the sound. Madam Pince, the old librarian shuffled over to their table, glowering at Blaise as she repeated her question. Harry looked at her with a puzzled expression until he realized that Blaise had taken to banging her forehead with the book. He shuddered at the dangerous glint in the woman's eyes. Pince worshipped her musty books and was reluctant to let the students near them. Anyone found mistreating them would face her wrath.

"Um-I-er-sorry," Blaise stuttered.

She put down the book cautiously before backing away. Harry shouldered his bag, not bothering to ask if he could check something out. Together they left the library, all under the suspicious gaze of the librarian.

"Can't any of the faculty here be normal?" Blaise muttered under her breath as they exited.

Harry thought of Snape, swooping around like an overgrown bat, Dumbledore, with his bright robes and everlasting supply of sweets..., "No, probably not."

"Oy, Fred, I thought Dumbledore got us out of detention with Snape?"

"That he did, George. He sent us to Filch instead."

"Then why are we cleaning Snape's room?"

"Cause the greasy git convinced Filch to let him 'borrow' us."

Fred and George Weasley were on their hands in knees, attempting to sort out the remains of the melted tables and chairs. It was their second week of detention, or as the twins saw it, plain old torture. For a while, the punishment wasn't so bad, especially in light of the party the Gryffindors threw them. But even martyrdom didn't sound as appealing when one was spending their every free moment under the watchful eye of Mrs. Norris and her twisted owner. Of course, that only lasted until they locked her in a broom closet. Filch spent hours scouring the halls. The next time the twins saw him, he'd already handed over the last of their freedom to Snape.

George sat back, stretching as he turned to his brother, "At least this is our last day of detention."

"Yeah, but we didn't do anything!"

"Still, you have to admire their handiwork, Fred. Whoever messed with Snape's ingredients got him good."

"Too true, George. There's nothing like seeing the old bat showing his Gryffindor pride."

Fred sat up and stretched, wincing at the ache in his back from bending over so long. He tossed a melted stool onto the junk pile and stood up, "C'mon, brother of mine, let's get going before Snape comes back and gives us another week of detention for contaminating his air supply."

George nodded wholeheartedly, and the two slouched out of the room, too tired to properly celebrate their freedom.

"Where to now?" George asked, holding back a yawn.

Fred glanced at his watching, seeing they had already missed dinner, "How about the kitchens?"

"Sounds like a plan."

The two stumbled tiredly up to the entrance hall, intent on getting to the corridor on the right of the main staircase. Halfway there, George halted, ducking behind a suit of armor.

"Oy, why did you-"

"Shhh! Listen..."

As the twins paused in the shadows, they heard voices drifting down the stairs. A moment later, they caught sight of two students, Slytherins by their green ties.

Fred rolled his eyes at his twin, "They're only firsties."

George kept him from stepping out of their hiding spot, "Just wait."

"So what now, Harry? That was a complete waste of our time."

A girl with long brown hair and blue eyes jumped off the last step, her back to the twins as she kept up the conversation.

Her friend shrugged, ruffling his already untidy hair in exasperation, "I guess we go back to the common room. There's no point asking Hagrid for help."

Fred and George froze as they caught sight of the boy's face. It was Harry Potter! Their brother, Ron, was in his year. Always ranting about the boy-who-lived, saying he was a blood traitor and the next dark lord. Personally, the twins thought he was overreacting. They'd met him for themselves, and he certainly didn't seem evil. Try telling that to Ron. According to him, Potter was rallying the junior death eaters of Slytherin, and would start offing the muggleborns any day now. Ron had always been stubborn like that.

"Oh, I know!" The girl, Blaise, grinned mischievously, "How about another prank?"

Harry seemed to think it over, "What did you have in mind?"

"I dunno, something new. We should find a different target though."

"Yeah, Snape probably knows to lock up his room better by now. It would take a while to get through whatever wards he put up."

Blaise frowned, "How are we going to cover our tracks this time?"

"We can always pin it on the Gryffindors."

"I was surprised how easily that worked last time."

Neither noticed as a suit of armor jerked.

"Yeah, well, no one ever said they were bright, and you know how much Snape hates them."

"Almost as much as he hates us?" She asked in a dry voice.

Harry winced, "Good point."

Their voices faded as they passed the twins, headed into the dark dungeons. The second they were gone, both twins toppled onto the floor as the suit of armor moved away, clanking its helmet in irritation.

"Did you-" George began, pushing himself off the floor.

"Hear that?" Fred finished as he stood up.

"It seems we've been framed, Gred."

"Yes, Forge, and you know what that means?"

"Of course, Gred. It's time-"

"For a little-"

"Payback."

In the empty hall, no one was around to hear the evil cackling as the two redheads plotted.

Harry sighed into his pillow and rolled over, clutching it tighter. He shivered, feeling a draft, and groped for his blanket. Eyes still shut tight, Harry muttered in annoyance when he found no trace of the Slytherin green comforter. Figuring he might as well get up, Harry rubbed his eyes and squinted... And promptly shut them again at the sight of the blinding sun. Wait... sun? Didn't he sleep in a windowless dungeon?

Now feeling slightly suspicious, Harry gave up all thoughts of drifting back to sleep. Groggily, he pushed himself into an upright position, keeping his eyes lowered to the blurry sight of his pajama pants while they adjusted to the light. After a moment, he looked up... only to wish he hadn't.

'This has got to be a dream... Yeah, I'm still asleep in my comfy bed, surrounded by the snoring idiots... Blaise will probably turn up soon, whining that's she's hungry... Yes, everything is perfectly normal... AND I AM NOT FLOATING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SODDING LAKE!'

Blink.

'No, still here. Damn...'

Now fully awake, and half-blind without his glasses, Harry took in his surroundings. Yep. He was still sitting in his usual bed, but somehow, it had been relocated to the Hogwarts lake. He was actually surprised he hadn't woken sooner, between the autumn chill, and the steady rocking of the four-poster bed as it struggled to stay afloat.

The emerald hangings were wide open, and soaked with water. Looking off to his left, Harry could see the castle, the distant towers just beginning to light up. He was actually some twenty feet from the lakeshore, and Harry had to wonder not only how he had gotten out here, but also how he was getting back.

"Five more minutes....," a sleepy voice mumbled behind him.

Looking toward the sound, Harry was much less shocked than he supposed he ought to be at the sight of his snoozing best friend,

floating a couple feet away. Things were actually starting to make sense... and someone back at the castle had better start running, far, far away...

Blaise was lying face down on her own bed, the sheets twisted around her. Taking a deep breath, Harry cupped his hands around his mouth, and called out, "OY, BLAISE! WAKE UP!"

It had the desired affect when Blaise gave a muffled yelp and tried to sit up. Of course, that didn't work as well with her arms and legs tangled in her blanket. She tumbled off, and Harry winced at the splash. That water must be freezing...

Blaise popped back up a second later, sputtering and shivering. She blinked the water out of her eyes and allowed a moment for her brain to catch up.

"WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING OUT HERE!"

Harry just waited for her to finish, still looking around for any means of escape. Soon Blaise spotted him and glared, while dogpaddling her way back to her bed. She clutched the side, trying to pull herself up, but her sodden nightgown dragged her back down.

Growling in frustration, she called over in a voice of forced calm, "Harry, is there any particular reason why I'm taking an unscheduled dip in the lake?"

"No idea, but I'd kind of like to go back now." Harry frowned at his bed in concentration. After some deliberation, he laid on his stomach and stuck his arm into the icy water, trying to paddle forward. He succeeded in moving a bit, but the bed only drifted in a circle.

"I don't think it's working, Harry," Blaise drawled, still treading water. She watched her friend with an expression torn between amusement and exasperation.

Harry sighed and pulled his dripping arm out of the water. He motioned Blaise over, watching her kick her arms and legs awkwardly. She finally crossed the two-foot space, and he gave her a lift up.

"What now?" Blaise whined, taking in their predicament.

"Maybe if we both take a side, we can paddle back?" Harry suggested, letting a small amount of doubt creep into his voice at his friend's incredulous expression.

"Paddle...?" She repeated faintly. Groaning in defeat, she shrugged, "Why not, it's that, or sit around, waiting for someone to fish us out..."

Both laid down in the same position Harry had been in before, hanging onto the bedposts while they splashed forward. It was going to be a long morning...

Thirty minutes later...

"Argh!" Blaise slapped her palm at the water angrily, "This is hopeless!"

Harry had to admit she was right. They had been struggling for quite some time, and his arms were starting to hurt. Besides, every time they managed to get several feet closer to the shore, the waves, however gentle, would just push them right back.

Blaise shrieked again and started tearing one of Harry's pillows in her rage. "I swear, when I find out who did this... I am going to make them suffer! Pomfrey won't be able to find enough pieces to put them back together when I'm through!"

Screaming out her temper one last time, Blaise scattered the feathery shreds of the pillow, and lifted the second one, flinging it with all her strength across the water. Sadly, the pillow made far more distance than their dysfunctional boat ever had.

Harry sat back, watching her mope. He was about to suggest another plan when something heavy smacked him from behind, sending him off the bed and face forward into the water. He came back up, coughing and holding onto the pillow that Blaise had previously thrown away. Blaise was staring down at him, looking a great deal cheered up.

Harry scowled, "I'm so glad I amuse you..."

"Sorry, Harry, but that was pretty funny," Blaise giggled, "You should have seen your face! It looked... hey, yeah, it looked just like that!" She pointed at the shocked expression on his face. Strangely enough, it was directed at something behind her...

Blaise turned around slowly, experience telling her this wasn't going to be pleasant. She was right. She came face to face with a pair of bulbous yellow eyes in an expanse of scaly, reddish skin. A sudden movement in the corner of her eye was all the warning she had before a long tentacle came forward, clutching something dark green. Blaise yelled, jumping backward to avoid it... and she fell right into the water with Harry.

"Hey, you're right, Blaise! That was hilarious!" Harry laughed as she glared through her dripping bangs.

"Ha, ha, very funny. And what was that thing..." Blaise peered cautiously over the bed.

"Blaise," Harry began, in a tone bordering on reverence, "Meet the giant squid."

"Wow," Blaise gasped.

Right before their eyes was the well-known denizen of the deep. Hogwarts' giant squid. Some of the older students had spoken of it. It would peer above the surface of the lake every now and then, looking for attention. The braver students would sit by the shore during the spring and play with it. The squid was notoriously ticklish.

Right now, the squid had its body wrapped around the Slytherin bed, one tentacle holding up a dripping length of material.

"Hey, that's my blanket!" Harry realized, recognizing the emerald crest on it.

Blaise snorted, but froze halfway. If she'd had her wand, a light bulb would be conjured above her head right now.

"Harry, this is brilliant!"

"What, it's just a blanket?"

Blaise rolled her eyes before shoving his head under the water. When he came back up glaring, she explained, "This is our ticket out of here, Harry! The squid can take us back! Er, right?" She asked, looking toward the squid.

It seemed to contemplate her for a moment, before vanishing under the water.

"I guess that's a no..." Harry said into the silence, holding his hands up defensively when it looked like Blaise wanted to dunk him again.

Suddenly, a torrent of bubbles surrounded them, and the bed jerked. Blaise and Harry barely had time to grab on before the bed went skimming across the water, pulling them with it. A dripping red tentacle was wrapped tightly around the bedpost...

Breakfast was just finishing up in the Great Hall, and the students were hurrying to their first class. As several Ravenclaws walked toward the front entrance on their way to Herbology, they were startled when the doors opened, followed by the sound of some rather colorful swearing. The rest of the school was soon drawn over by the commotion. Two first years stood dripping in their nightclothes, blushing at the attention.

"Where's a back door when you need it?" Harry muttered embarrassedly.

"What are you looking at?" Blaise snapped at a Hufflepuff boy whose gaze was aimed a little too low.

Harry groaned as Draco Malfoy sauntered over, "Hey, Potter, what happened? Don't tell me you tried to go skinny dipping with your girlfriend?"

Harry turned bright red as some of his housemates laughed. He stepped forward, leaning in Malfoy's face, and growled, "You know, I don't need a wand to kick your arse."

Malfoy pulled out his wand, a glint in his eye, "Just try it."

They were interrupted when a crowd of Gryffindors came down the stairs, bursting into laughter. A pair of red-haired twins made their way to the front, wearing obvious smirks.

"My, my, what do we have here, Forge?"

"I believe it's a couple of Slytherin firsties, Gred."

"Really," George shook his head, "I always new you snakes were slimy, but apparently the lake water wasn't enough to wash it all off."

"Yeah," Fred added, lifting a piece of weed out of Blaise's hair, "I think it just made 'em worse."

Meanwhile, Harry was staring openmouthed at the twins. They had a lot of nerve... Looking over at Blaise, he saw her physically shaking as she seethed at them. Harry shook his head. Blaise was only a step away from fulfilling her earlier threats of pain. While he wouldn't mind setting her loose on the twins at any other time, it was bad enough with everyone watching. He would prefer to change his clothes first too, and grab his glasses while he was at it. Then he would come back with his wand and see just how much of that book of hexes he remembered.

Shaking his head, Harry grabbed the fuming girl, and dragged her toward the dungeons, the students' laughter echoing behind them.

Blaise spent hours ranting up in Harry's dorm room after they had both dried off. She paced back and forth, occasionally pausing to look up another hex in the books she had grabbed from her trunk. Harry just sat watching her from his perch on the new bed that had appeared. Thank Merlin for house elves.

Sneak was curled around Harry's wrist, letting loose several snickers every now and then. Apparently, last night he had decided to go exploring. After more than a month of him sleeping curled around Harry's bedpost, *each and every night*, Sneak chose *that* night to be somewhere else. Harry sincerely doubted the credibility of that story.

When questioned further, Sneak claimed he'd been in the owlry looking for rats. Then Sneak hissed that anything the pigeon said was a lie, she was out to get him. Harry just rolled his eyes. Hedwig probably was out to get him, but it was Sneak's fault for trying to bite her during the morning owl post in the first place.

Pushing away thoughts of mental familiars for later, Harry recalled his earlier conversation with the twins. It was obvious Fred and George had found out about the prank with Snape. Why else would they target Harry and Blaise? But the duo weren't about to take this lying down. No one pranked them without suffering the consequences... Harry glanced at Blaise, who had paused to send a vicious blasting hex toward Draco Malfoy's bed. He had a feeling the consequences would be painful...

That night, Harry followed Blaise down to dinner, trying once again to get her to talk. She had disappeared during DADA, not that Quirrell noticed, and Harry still hadn't discovered what she'd been up to. All he knew was that Blaise had turned up in the common room afterwards, looking like the cat that ate the canary. Her expression had actually scared a few Hufflepuffs as they walked toward the Great Hall. It showed a disturbing resemblance to Snape when he was feeling particularly vindictive.

"C'mon, Blaise! You have to tell me, I'm your best friend!" Harry pleaded once more, trying to imitate the puppy eyes his friend was so good at.

Blaise ignored him, only to smirk wider as they exited they entered the main hall. Harry looked ahead suspiciously, where a large crowd of students was goggling at something on the wall.

Harry took a few cautious steps forward before his mouth dropped open in shock. Blaise came forward as well, arms crossed as she smiled in satisfaction. He turned to face her, still gaping, "You are truly evil, Blaise."

"Why thank you, Harry," she gave a mock bow before striding into the Great Hall. As she passed through the crowd, she waved cheekily at the wall.

There, trapped against the castle wall by a powerful sticking charm were Fred and George Weasley. Their clothes had been charmed to flash green and silver, and, from the lack of noise coming out of their mouths, it was obvious they'd been put under a silencing charm. But that wasn't the worst of it. Whoever had placed them up there had shown no mercy when they hit the two with a powerful bat bogey hex and left them to suffer. As the twins caught sight of Harry, they doubled their efforts to get down. The crowd just stood back, held at bay by the swarm of fluttering bogeys.

Harry took one last look at the wall, shrugged apologetically, and hurried after Blaise. There was no way he was going to risk her wrath to free Fred and George. She was *scary*. Good thing Blaise was on his side...

It took Professor Flitwick over two hours to unstick the Weasley twins, and that was after they dispelled the bat bogeys. When Fred and George finally confronted Blaise and Harry, no words were spoken, but from the glares exchanged, one thing was made clear. This meant war.

They had yet to figure out how the twins had gotten into the Slytherin dorms, but the prefects had already been sure to change the password to something less obvious than 'mudblood', and the older students were placing alarm spells around their beds. While no one actually cared what had happened to Harry and Blaise, they took great offense to the fact that a pair of Gryffindors had slipped past their defenses. Of course, even a trip jinx and a magical buzzer didn't save Draco Malfoy from the bucket of owl droppings rigged over his bed, courtesy of Harry.

The following week at Hogwarts was a bit hectic. The two pranking duos had declared an all out war on each other. It was no longer safe to sit in the Great Hall, as Blaise and Harry discovered at dinner one night...

Blaise stared down suspiciously at her food. Things were getting desperate. Neither team would surrender easily and nowhere was safe. She poked at a chicken leg, relieved when it only rolled over.

Sighing, she picked up her fork... and dropped it in shock a second later. It scooped up a dangerous amount of creamed corn and sent it flying at her face. Blaise's fork proceeded to fling the rest of her dinner at her, joined by the spoon, and even the butter knife slapped her across the face...

It only got worse as the days continued. Blaise and Harry ambushed the twins outside their charms class, stringing them up in the Great Hall. The two were covered in feathers and glue, hooting like owls as the called for assistance. The twins hit back with a vengeance. No one was sure how it happened, not even the victims, but sometime during lunch on Thursday, a house elf arrived to inform the headmaster they could call off the search. Harry Potter and Blaise Zabini had been found in the west tower after they tumbled out of a strange cabinet, looking distinctly befuddled. When the elf turned back around, the cabinet had vanished, and Miss Zabini was mumbling nonsense about turning weasels into pancakes. Thankfully, she forgot about that particular idea during her stay in the hospital wing.

Students were no longer surprised by the sight of Fred and George Weasley coming to class covered in purple slime, or Harry and Blaise entering the common room with various animal parts. Tensions were running high between the four, and it all came to a head that Friday...

Harry and Blaise pushed through the crowded hallway on their way to Transfiguration. They were going to be late at this rate, and both were already temperamental enough without losing points.

Blaise slipped through a knot of chattering Ravenclaws, hoping to get to the staircase before it changed, Harry right behind her. Suddenly, Blaise felt her ankles ran into an invisible rope, and she tripped, crashing to the marble floor as her bag skidded several feet forward. The sound of an inkbottle smashing and the sight of the oozing puddle of black fluid was the last straw.

As Harry went to pull Blaise up, she pushed him away and jumped to her feet, wand out and her blue eyes narrowed as she scanned the moving students. There, standing smugly against the banister were

the Weasley twins. Before anyone realized what was happening, including Harry, Blaise had stalked toward them, snarling as she aimed her wand. Harry set his mouth in determination and pulled out his own holly wand, marching up to her side. The twins met them halfway, reaching into their pockets.

Jabbing her wand at the nearest redhead, Blaise shouted, "*Furnunculus!*"

A bright purple light flew at him, but he jumped out of the way just in time and pointed at Harry, "*Tarantallegra!*"

Soon different colored hexes were flying around the corridor, nearly missing the other students. A stray *Densaugeo* hit a Hufflepuff third year whose muffled shriek could barely be heard around her elongated teeth. Luckily, most students had the sense to run for cover. The hallway certainly wasn't crowded anymore.

"*Finite!*" Gasping for breathe after he canceled the *Rictusempra*, Harry rolled out of firing range and flicked his wand angrily, "*Incendio!*"

Professor McGonagall slammed the door to her office, glowering at the occupants. *'In all her years... Hadn't seen so much trouble since those Marauders... Couldn't the fates give her a break for once?'*

McGonagall strode around her desk, taking a seat. She leaned forward looking down at the four students.

"Would anyone care to explain," she began, voice rising, "what in the name of Merlin you thought you were doing? Really! Dueling in the halls! Students could have been hurt! Twenty points will be taken-"

"But, Professor-" Fred protested, his paling complexion not seen through the black ash covering his face and the remains of his scorched hair.

"Please-" Harry jumped up, his cracked glasses falling off.

"We didn't-" George added while trying to peer through the blue tentacles covering his face.

"I had nothing to do with it!" a six-inch tall Blaise protested in her tiny voice, pointedly ignoring the indignant sound from Harry.

"Enough!" McGonagall bellowed, "I have let this go on long enough! And you two," she rounded on Harry as he glared at his shrunken friend, "I have held back, in the hopes that your head of house would say something..."

Harry snorted, *'He probably wanted to wait until we killed each other off...'*

Obviously, McGonagall was thinking along the same lines, because she huffed before continuing her rant, "You will all be receiving detention with Mr. Filch for the rest of the weekend!"

The twins groaned, echoed a second later by Harry and Blaise.

"Not again..." Fred moaned as he wiped a rag over the trophy case.

All four were trapped in their first night of detention together, while Filch gave out the usual speech about punishment in the background. If it were up to him, they'd have been put in shackles and hung in the dungeons for several days without food or water. Personally, Harry was very glad it wasn't up to him... or Snape. That would have been just as bad, worse as there wouldn't be any evidence left over to identify their corpses.

George grunted in reply to his twin, clearly not in the mood to talk. Harry bit his lip, feeling the stirrings of guilt, and tapped Blaise. She looked up from her cleaning, scowling, before seeing his face. Sighing, she tossed down her sponge and cleared her throat quietly.

"Eh-hem."

Fred and George looked up.

"Look guys, we're sorry," Harry trailed off.

"We never meant for things to happen that way." Blaise added.

Fred smiled slightly. Sitting up, He held out a hand, "Ah, forget about it. No hard feelings, right, Gred?"

"Absolutely, Forge," George held out a hand, grasping the only one that wasn't already taken, "We're used to getting detention with ole' Filch."

"Yeah, we're here practically once a month-"

"-Twice in June."

"Why?" Blaise asked.

Fred shrugged, "Exams make us irritable."

"We really are sorry though," Harry repeated.

"Yeah, we shouldn't have let you guys take the blame for our prank," Blaise said.

"Of course you shouldn't!" Fred gasped, scandalized.

"Why should we take the credit for that spectacular display?" his twin continued.

"Besides, it's not quite our style."

"Really?" Harry asked, lips quirked in a smile.

"Nope, we love explosions as much as the next bloke-"

"Even blew up a toilet seat in our first year-"

"Why?" Blaise asked curiously.

"We were trying to dispose of the evidence," George winked, "It almost worked. Filch thought we were after the toilet, never suspected we were trying to flush an entire bag of Zonko's."

The group burst into giggles, Blaise and Harry listening eagerly for details about the howler their mum sent afterwards.

"Quiet!" Filch snapped at the four, "No talking!"

Lowering her voice, Blaise asked, "So... truce?"

"Truce."

They continued to clean under Filch's watchful eye. He finally turned away at the arrival of Mrs. Norris. He cooed as he picked her up, and then addressed her as though waiting for the nightly report. The second he was distracted, Blaise leaned over to the twins.

"So... how *did* you guys get into the Slytherin dorms?"

Harry moved closer as well, eager to hear the answer. Instead, the twins gave double smirks.

"Ask us no questions, and we'll tell you no lies."

"What!" Blaise shrieked, trying to keep her voice down at a glare from Harry.

"Sorry, Blaise, but a true prankster never reveals his tricks," Fred explained, as if he were quoting an unspoken rule.

"Awww, c'mon!" Blaise pleaded once more.

"Nope."

"But-"

Harry sighed at his friend's persistence. Sometimes she could remind him of a Hufflepuff, though he'd never mention that out loud for his own safety. "Blaise, just give it up, they're not telling."

"Pleeeaaase?"

"Our lips are sealed."

"TELL ME!"

"NO TALKING!"

The Slytherin duo and the Weasley twins had joined forces. Far away, in the bowels of Hogwarts dungeon, Severus Snape felt a shudder run through his body, and he paused in grading papers. Looking around suspiciously, he saw nothing of interest, and went back to his work, dismissing the feeling as nothing.

"Oy, look, it's that Potter kid!"

"Potter? You mean-"

"Can't believe he's a Slytherin..."

"What was the sorting hat thinking?"

Harry clenched his teeth and tugged his bag onto his shoulder a little more forcefully, trying to ignore the whispers that had become common as he passed through the halls. Blaise, of course, wasn't as restrained.

"Prolly a dark wizard, jus' like you-know-who..."

"That's it!" Blaise snapped, startling the two Ravenclaws nearest them, "Don't you people have anything better to do than gossip? The next person to say something is going to get their lips hexed off!" Blaise jabbed her wand threateningly at an innocent bystander.

"Miss Zabini!" Professor McGonagall, head of Gryffindor house shrieked as she descended the staircase. She looked at the incriminating scene, her mouth thinning in fury. Blaise hurriedly dropped her wand from the quivering third year, but it was too late, "Ten points from Slytherin!"

Blaise groaned as McGonagall stalked off. Harry just shrugged in sympathy as they continued on their way to the library. It was October 31st, and a little past noon. They still had several hours before the Halloween feast and Harry had cajoled Blaise into a quick trip there.

As they pushed open the creaky doors, she whispered aside, conscious of Madam Pince glaring at them from the checkout counter, "McGonagall was a lot nicer before we got sorted, treated you like her long-lost grandson, she did!" Harry snorted. "It's true," Blaise pointed out defensively, "She's as bad as Snape, favoring her precious Gryffindors! Too bad Snape favors just about everyone in his house but us!"

"You actually want Snape to like you?" Harry smirked teasingly, "Why, Blaise, is there something you're not telling me..."

She made a sound of disgust and smacked him in the arm, "Don't go there, Harry!"

They made their way to a table in the back to drop off their bags before Harry entered the maze of shelves. Blaise watched him run his hand across the different titles before shaking his head and moving on.

Sneezing at the amount of dust, she scowled, "Why are we in here anyway? We've already spent hours searching for whatever Fluffy's guarding, and short of asking Pince for help, I doubt we're gonna find anything."

Harry paused as he scanned the back of a wrinkled book cover, "We're not here for that. I'm trying to find a book." He frowned and tried to stand on tiptoe to see the top shelf, cursing his height as he did so.

"What!" Blaise grabbed the back of Harry's robes to bring him back down to eye level, "Then what the heck are we doing in here on a weekend? We could be off doing something more productive... like charming the owls, or hexing the statues! Anything but homework!"

"This isn't homework. I wanted to find some more information about a spell I saw in one of my books. It was mentioned briefly, and the effects sounded brilliant, but I didn't see any details about how to cast it..."

Slightly pacified, Blaise let go of him, "What do you need it for? The twins are lying low, and Filch is practically stalking us. Unless your spell can make us invisible, I don't see how we're going to get anything done before the feast," Blaise pouted, "and we completely missed Mischief Night! Can you believe these people don't know the first thing about the annual tradition of silly string and toilet paper?" Her expression looked scandalized at the mere thought.

Harry snickered, "Yeah, almost makes me wish we were back at the orphanage. I'm sure Cromwell will miss us this year. Hopefully,

someone else will think to continue our legacy of making his life a living hell.

"But back to subject at hand," Harry gave a mischievous grin, "No, the spell won't make us invisible, but from what I've read, I don't think we'll need it. It's based off the Befuddlement Draught," he pointedly ignored Blaise's mocking whisper of 'potions nerd', "and places the subject in a state of confusion until the spell wears off."

"Which means...?"

"It means, that whoever we cast it on would be too out of it to notice if we walked two feet in front of him."

"Wicked!" Blaise's eyes lit up in excitement.

"Yeah," Harry agreed, "only one problem."

"What?"

"I can't find the book."

Blaise visibly deflated, "Damn."

An hour later, Harry was about ready to give up. Blaise was trailing behind him sullenly as she bemoaned her lost free time. Harry just ignored her as he made his way deeper into the library. At one point, they came near the border of the restricted section. A scarlet rope was used to cut it off, but it was a completely muggle defense. Any warding spells might interfere with some of the older books. Whether this made getting in any easier, was yet to be seen. Sure, all you had to was duck under the rope, but that was only if you got past Pince. That woman had to have some kind of sixth sense about her books. When Blaise had paused in their search just to glance at the distant shelves in interest, Pince had intercepted her vision in moments, scowling menacingly as she pushed her cart.

"Found it!" Harry whispered triumphantly, causing Blaise's whip around so fast it cracked.

Harry stood in front of the bookcase, head tilted back to observe the very top. His eyes were focused on a dusty, leather-bound book at least two feet above him. Standing on tiptoe, he strained to reach it, his fingertips just brushing the spine. Suddenly, Harry stumbled forward, his hand knocking into the books, and sending them tumbling over the other side. He winced as he heard them crash to the floor, followed by a soft 'oomph'.

Running over to the next aisle, Harry and Blaise found a girl sitting on the floor amidst a large pile of books. She frowned as she read the titles one by one, trying to figure out which were hers. Harry crouched down to help her, murmuring apologies until he looked up and recognized her. It was the know-it-all Gryffindor, Granger.

"It's no problem, really..." the bushy-haired girl trailed off when she took in her companions as well, eyes widening at the Slytherin badges on their robes. She met Harry's eyes, and her own made the familiar trek up to the famous scar barely concealed by his bangs.

Harry coughed politely, feeling a little awkward in the silence. The girl jumped in surprise and blushed.

"Sorry about that," Harry said, picking up his book from the mess on the floor.

She seemed startled at what he said, and stood up with a small stack of texts in her arms. Seeing she wasn't about to say anything, Harry searched for something to talk about. He spotted the title on the thickest book she held, and jumped at the chance.

"Is that *Hogwarts: A History*?"

Granger looked up in what could easily be described as shock, "You've read *Hogwarts: A History*?"

"Of course, hasn't everybody?"

From behind Harry, Blaise mumbled, "I haven't."

Smirking, Harry replied, "Fine, then I'll make sure you do before the weekend is over."

"But, Harry!" Blaise whined, "I don't wanna read it! Do you see how big that thing is? It'll take me forever..."

"Too bad, 'cause I'm not gonna leave you alone until you do."

Standing on the sidelines, Hermione Granger gave an uncharacteristic giggle at the friendly bickering. They were certainly different from the other, prim and proper Slytherins she'd come into contact with so far.

Harry turned his back on the pouting Blaise to address the Gryffindor, "So, what are you doing in the library on your day off? You've gotta take a break from studying every once and a while," he grinned to show he was joking. Everyone knew of the girl's enthusiasm for schoolwork.

Hermione blushed and looked down at the books in her arms, her fizzy curls hiding her expression. "I- well, I don't have anything else to do. My housemates don't like me very much, I'm afraid..."

Harry frowned at the sadness in her voice. He knew what it was like to be alone. He didn't know what he'd do if he hadn't met Blaise all those years ago. Harry exchanged a glance with his friend, and she nodded understandingly.

Putting on a smile, Harry spoke to Hermione, "Then we have something in common! I'm pretty sure my dorm mates would happily curse me in my sleep, or at least Malfoy would... His cronies aren't coherent enough to pronounce anything overly dangerous," he laughed at the horrified look on her face. "Anyway, it's obvious your housemates are just jealous. After all, Gryffindors aren't exactly known for their common sense. I'm surprised you're not a Ravenclaw!"

She lifted her head slightly, "Well, that hat did suggest it..."

Harry snorted, "Figures. Bloody hat can never make up its mind. Might've stuck me in Gryffindor with you if I hadn't told it to hurry up."

"Really?"

"You traitor! I should've known!" Blaise gasped and pointed a finger accusingly at him in a perfect imitation of Ronald Weasley.

Harry smirked and crossed his arms, "Well, no need to ask about *your* sorting. You probably threatened the hat before it could say anything about where to put you."

Blaise's sheepish expression was all the answer they needed before all three started cracking up.

"Quiet!" Pince's sharp reprimand halted their hysterics, and Hermione slapped a hand over her own mouth with a cowed look.

"So what are you two doing here?" Hermione asked quietly as she placed her heavy books on a table.

"I suppose you could call it... extra curricular research..." Harry suggested vaguely.

"Uh-huh..." Hermione nodded sarcastically.

Harry and Blaise fidgeted guiltily. They hoped she wasn't planning to run to a teacher already. Hermione wasn't only known for her love of learning. She also had an obsession with rules. Just last week, she had been heard giving a loud monologue about lost points to the Weasley twins after the prank war.

Hermione casually flipped open one of her books as she sat down, hiding a smile from the duo. She finally looked up as the tension became unbearable, "Want any help?"

Blaise's mouth dropped open, dumbfounded at the unpracticed smirk Hermione was wearing. Harry just grinned and passed over the spell book. Maybe there was hope for her yet...

Harry, Blaise, and Hermione spent the next hour discussing hexes. Even if she didn't use them, Hermione knew a repertoire of spells for pranking. However, by the end of their session, she had made it quite clear that she wanted no part of whatever they were up to, and if

anyone asked, they had never spoken. It wouldn't look good for any of them to be found fraternizing with the enemy house.

They parted ways on fairly good terms, though. Hermione left muttering about how behind she was going to get on the essay Professor Sprout assigned for next week, while Blaise rolled her eyes and said something about the Gryffindor being a lost cause.

Harry and Blaise made their way back toward the dungeons, debating just what they could do to put that spell to good use.

"I say we use it to break into Gryffindor tower!" Blaise said eagerly.

"I dunno," Harry trailed off, "We haven't actually tried the spell yet. I'm not sure if I could get it to work on that many people at once. And then there's finding out where exactly the Gryffindors live. Sure, we know it's in a tower, but there are hundreds of those. Do you really want to end up getting lost again?"

Blaise made a face at that, "Hell no! There's no way I'm gonna chance that! Besides, with our luck, we'd end up running into Fluffy again."

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea..." Harry pondered as they stopped outside the Slytherin portal.

"What! You want to try out a confusion hex on that monster? Let's see, which would be worse? The spell backfiring in a room full of rabid Gryffindors, or cornered by three pairs of acidic fangs?" she drawled, holding up her hands as though weighing the pros and cons.

Harry winced. "Maybe we could start small? You know, Malfoy always makes good practice-"

Whatever Harry was going to say, was abruptly cut off when he ran right into a brick wall. No, wait, it was just Crabbe. And speak of the blonde ponce himself...

"Well, well, if it isn't Potty and his little girlfriend."

Blaise's pale skin flushed a dark red as Crabbe and Goyle guffawed stupidly. Harry just crossed his arms over his robes, eyeing Malfoy as though he was considering the comment.

'Hmmm, insults and threats don't seem to work any more. I wonder...'

Sighing, Harry dropped his hands at his sides in defeat, "Wow, Malfoy. That just hurt. Really, I think I'm going to cry," Harry wiped an imaginary tear from under his glasses.

A few students passing through the corridor stopped to watch the odd display. Malfoy looked slightly confused as Harry got down on his knees in front of him.

"I bow down to your superior intellect. You truly are a master of ridicule. Where do you come up with such painful insults? I mean, 'Potty'? So original! I swear, I haven't heard that one since I was six!"

By now, Blaise had realized what Harry was doing, and she stopped staring at her friend as though questioning his sanity. Playing along, she stepped forward. A few people in the crowd started to giggle as Blaise clasped her hands in front of her and gave a bright smile. She addressed Malfoy, who was looking a little too smug at the sight of the Boy-Who-Lived watching him in awe.

"Harry's so right! And calling me his girlfriend! That one's my favorite! How ever did you think of it?" Furrowing her eyebrows in thought, she suddenly gasped in fake revelation. "Oh, Drakey-poo," Blaise cooed the name she'd often heard Pansy using, trying not to gag as she said it, "Don't tell me you're... *jealous*?"

Malfoy's smirk dropped in an instant, and Harry lost his focus as he gaped at his friend.

"You poor thing! Of course you would feel this way! Never mind that Harry and I are just friends, but with so many girls worshipping the ground he walks on, I have to practically beat them off with a stick! It must be simply dreadful for you. I mean, you guys are in the same house after all, but all you've got are Crabbe and Goyle. What's the matter, Malfoy, they stop putting out?"

Now it was the blonde's turn to flush beet red. Crabbe and Goyle seemed lost with their leader out of commission. The students in the crowd burst out laughing, and began to move on, still chuckling at the look on Malfoy's face. Blaise smirked, and pushed past the frozen trio into the common room, her shocked friend hurrying after.

Following Blaise to the green sofa in front of the fire, Harry sat down, still in shock.

"Wow, Blaise. That was just... wow."

Blaise snorted, "Thanks, Harry. But that twit had it coming. He's been driving me crazy with all his 'girlfriend' comments." She huffed irritably, "Seriously, can't I hang out with a guy without the rest of the world thinking I'm snogging him?"

Harry nodded, before some of her earlier words caught up with him, "Wait a minute. What girls do you have to beat off with a stick?"

Blaise rolled her eyes, "Harry, you are so clueless sometimes. Only you could miss that half the girls in this school are ogling you."

"What?" Harry made a sound of disbelief, "That's impossible! How can they like me when everyone's acting like I'm the next Voldemort!" Several overhearing Slytherins hissed at the name, but Harry ignored them.

"Don't ask me," Blaise shrugged, "You could probably start killing off the muggleborns and it wouldn't deter the Harry Potter Fan Club one bit."

"I HAVE A FAN CLUB?" Harry nearly fell off the couch in shock.

Blaise nodded sympathetically. She knew her friend didn't exactly enjoy his newfound fame. That's why she almost couldn't bring herself to tell him what she did next. Almost.

"Yep. In fact, some fourth year tried to sell me a t-shirt the other day..."

"I am so disturbed..."

"Yes, Harry, I heard you the first time you said that," Blaise answered in a tight voice as they walked toward the Great Hall that night.

"I am *really* disturbed..."

"Okay, Harry I get it!"

"Blaise," Harry turned to her, eyes wide. "What if they're watching me right now? I have stalkers... They could be anywhere!"

"Relax, Harry" Blaise said in a soothing voice, desperately holding back a snigger, "I'm sure you'll be fine. After all, isn't he supposed to be guarding you?" She asked, pointing towards the snake hidden under Harry's sleeve.

He grumbled something under his breath that Blaise didn't hear.

"What was that?"

Harry scowled, pushing up his robes discretely in the busy hallway. "I said, 'Some bodyguard he is.' Sneak fell asleep ten minutes ago."

This time, Blaise couldn't hold back her laughter.

As the duo prepared to enter the hall, a gaggle of students sporting red and gold ties shoved them rudely aside. Harry sneered, '*Gryffindors.*'

"Honestly, she's a nightmare!" The voice of Ron Weasley was heard over the din as he ranted to his friends.

"C'mon, Ron, she's not that bad-" Dean Thomas tried.

"Not that bad?" Weasley scoffed, "Are you kidding? She's always badgering me in class, like I asked for her help." He mimicked a girly falsetto, " 'No, you're doing it wrong! It's three stirs counter-clockwise, like this!' It's no wonder she doesn't have any friends-"

Suddenly, a blur of bushy brown hair pushed past them, sobbing as she ran off.

"I think she heard you," Longbottom's voiced pointed out hesitantly.

Weasley shifted uncomfortably, "Whatever." He pursed his lips and walked toward the table, his friends trailing after.

"Stupid prat!" Harry said once they were gone. He looked into the lavishly decorated hall, with its fluttering live bats and glowing pumpkins, before turning back to the deserted corridor, a thoughtful look in his eyes. "Maybe we should go after her."

Blaise glanced longingly at the mountains of candy on the Slytherin table before shaking her head forcefully. "No, you go in. I'll get her."

"Huh? Why?" Harry didn't understand why Blaise would pass up on that much sugar, but tell Harry to go ahead.

"Look, Harry," she explained patiently, "You go inside, and I'll find Hermione. After I talk to her, we'll come back, and you had better save me a candy apple." She said the last part with a small growl.

"Are you sure-"

"Yes. Trust me, it's a girl thing," she added as though that explained everything. Actually, it did.

Blaise hurried off in the opposite direction, leaving Harry to take a seat at the Slytherin table by himself. He flinched every time he passed a girl in the hall, never mind that most of them were too involved in their own conversations to notice. When he finally reached his usual seat, he lowered himself with some trepidation, keeping an eye on Pansy Parkinson at the other end.

Harry was therefore caught by surprise when a hand tapped him on the shoulder, and he leapt off the bench in shock. Turning around, he found Theodore Nott watching him with a bemused expression on his face.

"You alright, Potter? You seem kind of... twitchy."

Harry nodded as he sat up again, taking the time to observe his other roommate. He was tall for a first year, with straight, dark brown hair

and eyes. Nott was one of the less outspoken members of his house. While Malfoy revered in the reputation he had gained among his peers, Nott was more of an unknown. He was a perfect example of Slytherin cunning, always watching, waiting for the right time to make a move. At the same time, he had never insulted Harry or Blaise to their faces, which was a point in his favor, as far as Harry was concerned.

"Interesting turn out, don't you think?" He asked once Harry was settled, waving a hand to take in the décor. "I really wouldn't have expected this of Dumbledore. I was actually picturing something in the same blinding colors as his robes."

Deciding there was no harm in pursuing the conversation, Harry replied, "Yeah, well, I doubt the rest of the staff would let him get away with it. But just wait, we haven't seen his idea of Valentines Day yet."

Nott paused as he reached for a glass of pumpkin juice to give a small shudder. "Good point, I'll keep that in mind." Glancing around the table, he asked, "Where's Zabini? I don't think I've ever seen one of you without the other. What happened? Lover's tiff?"

Rolling his eyes, Harry had to agree with Blaise's earlier complaint about their non-existent love lives. Feeling as though he was going to be saying this a lot, Harry replied, "We're just friends." Seeing Nott's skepticism, he changed the subject, "And we're not fighting. She just had to go somewhere... It's complicated."

Seeing that Harry didn't want to continue, Nott switched to safer topics. They continued to talk throughout the feast. Harry was surprised by how normal his fellow Slytherin could be. It was also nice to know that he had at least one ally in his own house. That meant one less junior death eater vying for his death.

Harry glanced up from his new acquaintance every now and then, searching the double doors with hopeful look on his face. Unfortunately, Blaise never returned. He wondered what could have kept her...

"-and there's a quidditch game coming up soon, first of the season, between Slytherin and Ravenclaw. I hear Ravenclaw's got a new seeker this year. A second year, Cho Chang. They say she's pretty good, so I don't know what our chances are. The seeker we've got now is absolute rubbish-"

Nott stopped talking when he realized his companion was no longer listening. Harry sat with his head propped on his hand, his eyes squinting in pain.

"Are you alright?"

Harry clenched his teeth as another wave of pain flushed through his body, the worst of it emanating from his scar. Just as suddenly as it had come, the feeling drained away, leaving him confused and sore. Seeing his friend's concern, Harry wondered what he should say.

'Oh, yeah, I'm fine. Just feels as though an alien from one of those muggle movies is about to burst through my skull. You know, right where my scar is, the magical one caused by the killing curse that bounced off my forehead when I was one...'

"I'm fine. Headache, that's all," Harry gave a weak smile.

Nott frowned, but Harry was saved from explanation when the doors to the Great Hall banged open.

'Blaise?' Harry tried not to let his disappointment show too obviously when Quirrell scurried through the doors, nearly tripping over his own robes. It wasn't that he hated Quirrell, Snape certainly held the position as his least favorite teacher, but the guy was always *watching* him. Harry had to wonder if Quirrell was part of his so-called fan club too. He wrinkled his nose at the thought, *'That was so wrong...'*

"H-Headmaster!" Quirrell stuttered out over the chattering students as he ran toward the head table. Dumbledore stood up from his seat at the sight of his panicked defense teacher. That in itself wasn't all that uncommon, but the man looked ready faint...

"Troll! Troll in the dungeons!" Quirrell took a shaky breath, wiping the perspiration of his face, "Th-thought you ought to know..." Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he collapsed to the floor.

Dead silence rang out in the hall as the students stared at their fallen professor in horror. Then all hell broke loose.

Several girls at the next table over began screaming, a few boys as well. Students knocked over goblets and plates as they leapt to their feet, and there was a mad rampage to reach the doors. Quite a few people ended up stepping on the unconscious professor, not that anyone really cared. At the Gryffindor table, Weasley spit out a mouthful of candy corn on Parvati Patil who was shrieking for multiple reasons. Just three seats down from Harry, Malfoy ducked under the table, while Crabbe and Goyle looked around for something to punch. The teachers struggled to regain control. Tiny Professor Flitwick used a spell to seal the doors against the mob, and Snape's glare was enough to halt most of them.

"SILENCE!" Dumbledore's voice boomed out, most likely amplified by magic. In a calmer tone, he continued, "Students, please return to your house common rooms in an orderly fashion. Follow the prefects and stick together..."

With that, the doors were open again, and the tide of students moved out, slightly less frantic, but conversing in loud voices as each wondered how a troll managed to break into Europe's top wizarding school. Wasn't that supposed to be impossible?

Watching his housemates try to leave with what was left of their dignity, Harry remembered something that made him want to smack the headmaster for his stupidity. Climbing up onto the table, Harry ignored Nott's questioning gaze and tried to get the other Slytherins' attention.

"Hey! Stop!" No one seemed to hear him over the commotion until a piercing whistle from Nott got through. Harry gave him a grateful look, receiving a nod in return. Seeing all those eyes focusing on him, Harry yelled out, "Oy! Did you all forget that the dorms are in the dungeons?"

Even the sixth years returned his question with blank stares. Harry sighed, muttering about common idiocy, before he added, "With the troll?"

That finally got through to them, and a smaller version of the mass panic resulted before Snape's voice cut in, "Mr. Potter, as important as your already over-inflated ego is, kindly get off the table!" Harry huffed before complying. "Slytherins, head for the library instead. I will collect you when this is over. Stay with the prefects!"

This time, Harry moved to join Nott as they exited. Leaning aside, Nott whispered, "I wonder how a troll got in? Aren't they supposed to have the IQ of a flobberworm?"

Being the muggle-raise wizard he was, Harry just asked, "What's a flobberworm?"

"Never mind. Hey, where are you going?" Nott halted when he saw Harry wasn't following the rest of their house.

"I have to find Blaise! She doesn't know about the troll!"

"Are you insane, Potter? There's a bloody troll on the loose, and you want to go play hero?"

"You go on, cover for me if anyone asks."

Nott raised an eyebrow, "And why should I? What's in it for me?"

Harry glared, *'It's at times like these that I can see why the rest of the school distrusts the Slytherins.'* But his frown soon slipped into a smirk, *'Of course, the hat did place me here too.'*

"Well, Nott," Harry gave a phony sigh, "I suppose you don't have to help me. I mean, it's not like we're friends or anything, we've never even spoken before today. Although... if anyone discovers I'm missing, you were the last one seen with me. I can't imagine what the headmaster will think if I disappear, his precious little savior. He would probably go after the sneaky Slytherin that disposed of me-"

"Okay! Okay, I get it," Nott sneered, "Go save your little girlfriend, Potter. You're such a Gryffindor..."

Harry's smug smile slipped as soon as he heard that last comment. He turned back, ready to give Nott a piece of his mind, but the boy was already walking away.

"Hey! That was so uncalled for! I'm not a Gryffindor!" He hurriedly added, "And Blaise isn't my girlfriend!"

Only Nott's laughter reached his ears, as Harry, face burning with embarrassment, headed down the hallway Hermione had run down earlier.

Harry crept through the empty corridors, stopping every now and then to avoid the occasional prowling teacher. He nearly ran into Snape once, and was forced to hide behind a suit of armor while the man climbed one of the moving staircases. He was a little curious as to why his head of house was moving upstairs if the troll was in the dungeons. Harry hoped that meant they had caught the troll. Sure, he was determined to find Blaise at all costs, but he had no plans to battle it. So, he was a coward. Despite what Nott may have thought, Harry did have a sense of self-preservation.

Walking through the second floor, he wondered where the two girls could have gone. It would have been somewhere private, but neutral at the same time. It's not like Blaise could have a heart-to-heart chat with Hermione in the Slytherin dorms. The only place Harry could think of was the library...

'If they turn up there, Nott is never going to let me live this down...'

Harry had a nasty habit of being oblivious to his surroundings while deep in thought. As Blaise had once said, it was one of his biggest faults, and they should remedy it soon if he didn't want to end up getting killed one day. Unfortunately, Blaise wasn't around to knock some sense into Harry, so he didn't hear the noisy footsteps and heavy breathing right behind him. However, even he couldn't miss the wand point shoved into his back the next moment.

"Don't make any sudden movements, Potter."

It didn't take long to recognize the voice, and when he did, Harry just scoffed and turned around, ignoring the threat. He came face to face with an angry Weasley.

"I thought I told you-"

"Oh shut up!" Harry barked, pulling out his own wand, and using his hand to slap away the offending stick still hovering over his chest; the wrong side, to his own amusement.

"Weasley! What are you doing, stalking me?"

"I'm keeping an eye on you, Potter! You may have the teachers fooled, but I know better! I bet you let that troll in yourself!"

"What- Argh! Bugger off, you bloody idiot! Now is not the time for your Gryffindor stupidity! I'm hungry, I have a splitting headache, and my best mate is out here somewhere while a friggin' troll is on the loose! I'm not in the mood for this, so keep your sodding conspiracies to yourself!"

"Don't give me that, Potter!" Weasley spat, clenching his wand tighter. "There's no way I'm gonna leave a traitor like you wandering around the halls-"

Harry interrupted the oncoming tirade, sighing in frustration, "Look, I don't care what you do, Weasley. Stay here if you want. I'm going."

Weasley puffed out his chest, "Then I'm coming with you."

Harry shrugged and turned away, calling over his shoulder, "Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you. You may want to stay out of sight. I hear wild beasts have something against the color red," he hid a grin as Weasley grabbed a tuft of his copper hair in fear.

The unlikely pair continued their search in silence, for the most part. Actually, Weasley spent most of it expressing his colorful opinion of Harry, who just ignored him in favor of hissing quiet comments to

Sneak. The little snake was finally awake, and he told Harry just what he thought of his little heroics.

"I think you're an idiot."

Harry tuned out both Weasley and Sneak after that.

"Ergh! What's that smell?" Weasley groaned in disgust.

Before Harry could answer, the floor shook with lumbering footsteps. From out of the dark hallway, waddled a hulking shape, dragging a wooden club along the floor. The creature was giving off a foul odor, and Harry fought not to gag.

They held completely still as the troll pulled open a random door, nearly ripping it off its hinges. It stomped inside, the door finally falling shutting once its club had slid through as well. Harry sighed in relief, and beckoned for Weasley to hurry up before it came back. Then he froze as a piercing scream reached his ears, coming from the room with the troll...

One Hour Earlier:

"Hermione? Are you in there?" Blaise whispered, peering into the girls' bathroom. It had been fifteen minutes since she left Harry, and the feast. Hermione had already had a head start, so she worried that she'd never find the girl. Fortunately, the sound of Hermione's soft cries had seeped into the hall as Blaise was walking by.

"Go away," a teary voice answered, followed by a sniffle.

Blaise stepped inside instead, and found Hermione curled up by the wall, her arms wrapped around her legs. Sighing, Blaise took a seat on the floor as well, draping an arm around the girl's shoulders awkwardly.

"C'mon, Hermione, don't listen to Weasley! He's just a-"

"But he's right!" her voice cracked, "I don't have any friends, the others all tease me, no one likes me-"

"Hey! Are you calling me and Harry nobodies?" Blaise cut in teasingly.

"No, but-" Hermione protested.

"Because we're your friends, and we certainly like you. Who cares what some barmy Gryffindors think! And if they ever pick on you, just ask, and we'll charm their hair pink!" she declared, handing Hermione a handkerchief.

"Pink?" Hermione asked, blowing her nose loudly.

Blaise nodded solemnly, "Pink."

Hermione gave small laugh, encouraging Blaise to continue, "So what do you say we go back to the feast? You can even sit with us!"

"Won't your housemates be mad?"

"Of course, but that hasn't stopped us yet!"

Blaise gave Hermione a hand up, holding up a hand when she went to give back the soggy handkerchief. Together they went to leave, Blaise chatting about how she couldn't wait to get back to the Great Hall.

"Did you see it, Hermione? It was spectacular!"

She nodded, "Yes, the charms on the hall really were quite advanced-"

"Screw the charms! I'm talking about the food! There were pumpkin pasties, candy corn, chocolate pudding, and candy apples! Harry better have remembered to save me one-"

Blaise pulled open the door, but she didn't get very far. A feeling of déjà vu came over her as she ran into something and was knocked to the floor. Blaise looked up when she heard Hermione scream.

"Oh, crap!"

"Blaise! Hermione!" Harry ran towards the door, only now realizing where it led. He was jerked back as Weasley grabbed onto the hood of his robes.

"What are you doing? Let me go!" Harry snarled.

He didn't move, "You can't go in there!"

"And why not?"

"It's the girls' bathroom!" he answered as though it should have been obvious.

Making a sound of disgust at the Gryffindor's reasoning, Harry pushed him out of the way and ran in, ignoring his indignant calls.

In the bright fluorescent lights of the bathroom, Harry managed to get his first good look at the troll. What he saw was a towering monster, taller even than Hagrid, with grayish-green skin. It wore brown rags that barely resembled a pair of pants on a body that was round like a boulder, with long, dragging arms, and a tiny, misshapen head perched on top. The expression on its face held a single-minded determination to crush everything in sight. The troll was huge, terrifying, ugly... For some reason, it reminded him of a four-year-old Dudley.

"Harry!" Blaise shrieked as she noticed her best friend. Then she was forced to grab Hermione and duck as the troll took a swing with its massive club.

"Blaise! Hold on!" Harry called back, trying to figure out how he was going to get to them. Luckily, the troll was too preoccupied to notice the two boys behind him. Getting an idea, Harry yelled out to Weasley, "Distract it!"

"What?" He squeaked, looking like he wanted nothing more than to turn and run.

"Weasley, I need you to distract it! I'm going to try a spell but I need to hit it dead on or its hide will repel it!"

Weasley looked around frantically for some other solution. Then his eyes landed on the bushy-haired girl cowering against one of the sinks, tear tracks still visible on her face. A new determination settled in Weasley and he nodded, trying to scrounge up some of that fabled Gryffindor courage. Picking up a broken tap off the floor, he chucked it right at the troll's head, yelling out at the same time,

"Oy! Pea brain!"

Harry muttered to himself as the troll swiveled around, blinking stupidly, "That certainly got his attention." Running forward, he lifted his wand, "Here goes nothing... *Confundus!*"

A beam of yellow light left Harry's wand and hit the troll's face. Everyone waited anxiously to see if it had worked. Then the troll scrunched up its bulbous nose, and let out an enormous sneeze, spraying an unidentifiable green goo on the bathroom mirror.

"Eeeewwww..." Blaise moaned, wiping off her robes in horror.

Suddenly, the troll gave an angry roar, lurching towards the two girls. Hermione screamed again as it pulled back its club. Not caring about the consequences, Harry took a running leap and clung to the end of the weapon. He held on for dear life as the troll tried to dislodge him.

As Harry came flying forward again, his sleeve jerked up, and Sneak slid out. Hissing, he landed coiled on top of the troll's head. The troll didn't seem to notice him, that is, until Sneak wrapped around its neck and started squeezing.

"Let go, you stupid thing! That's my human you're waving around!"

Weasley stared in shock at the tiny snake trying to suffocate a nine-foot troll. Whipping around, he yelled at Blaise, "He's got a bloody snake!"

"Forget the damn snake, Weasley!" she screeched, trying to pry Hermione's clutching hands off her long enough to grab her wand, "Focus on the troll that's trying to kill us!"

"What do you want *me* to do?" he sputtered, watching in fear as the troll managed to grab Harry by the leg.

"Anything!"

"Uh..." He looked lost, until a mini light bulb seemed to go off as he raised his wand, "Let's see... swish and flick... right..." he muttered.

Hermione heard him and gave an encouraging nod.

"*Wingardium Leviosa!*"

Harry gasped as he felt a massive hand clutch his leg, and suddenly, he was hanging upside down. He struggled to push down his robes long enough to see what was going on. By the time he managed to flick his green tie out of his eyes, he saw a blurry shape speeding towards his head. He closed his eyes and waited for the inevitable pain...

Then Harry heard Weasley's spell, and he peeked an eye open to find the club hovering up in the air, as the troll frowned stupidly at its empty hand.

"Wicked..." Weasley said in awe. Whether it was the fact that he'd accomplished a spell, or that Hermione's babbling actually came in handy, Harry didn't take the time to figure out. As soon as Weasley stop concentrating, the spell ended, and the heavy piece of wood dropped, landing directly on the troll's head. Everyone in the room winced at the sound of cracking bone.

The troll wobbled, teetering on the edge of consciousness. Its hand went limp, releasing Harry, who smacked into the tile floor before quickly scooting back towards the others. The troll blinked one last time, then toppled backwards with a resounding crash that no doubt echoed through the castle.

The group glanced at each other, still in shock, then back at the troll lying in the middle of the girls' bathroom.

Blaise crept forward first, nudging a grayish arm with her shoe. "Is it dead?"

"No, just knocked out, I think," Harry responded as he lifted up Sneak from the troll's neck. He seemed to be more annoyed than hurt, so Harry quickly tucked him back up his sleeve.

"What now?" Weasley asked.

Before anyone could answer that, the door to the bathroom burst open once more, and a tide of frantic teachers barged in.

Professor McGonagall was in the lead, her mouth thin and pinched. Snape was right behind her, scowling more than ever, with a trembling Quirrell bringing up the rear. The two heads up houses came up short when they spotted the unconscious troll. Quirrell took one look at it, let out a faint whimper, and sat down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll to examine it, while McGonagall gave a disapproving glare to the two Slytherins. Blaise tried not glare back while she muttered something about favoritism.

"What on earth were you thinking?" said Professor McGonagall with cold fury in her voice. Harry watched as her eyes flicked to the two Gryffindors in the back, before continuing, "You are lucky you weren't killed! Why aren't you in your dormitory?"

"Please, Professor," a quiet voice interrupted, "they were looking for me."

"Miss Granger!"

"It was my fault," Hermione whispered toward her shoes as the other three tried not to gape. Weasley wasn't succeeding too well. Hermione Granger? Lying to a teacher? Harry wondered if hell had frozen over yet.

"I went looking for the troll. I- I thought I could handle it on my own because I've read all about them."

"While that was extremely foolish of you, Miss Granger, I highly doubt these two didn't play a part in this."

Blaise made an indignant sound, "Hey!"

"What exactly would we have done, professor?" Harry asked, in an annoyed tone. "Personally, I don't find trolls very funny, and I doubt anyone else would care if we turned it red and gold."

From behind McGonagall, Harry saw Snape's eyes widened a fraction, and they seemed to drill into Harry's, giving him the sudden urge to blink. Harry looked away, wondering what was wrong. He replayed in his mind his last words and stifled a gasp, *'Oh, shit!'*

"Red and gold, you say?" Snape purred as he stalked forward, "You know, the Weasley twins had that same idea not too long ago at the beginning of the term..."

"Heh heh, will wonders never cease..." Harry laughed nervously as he looked anywhere but at Snape. His eyes landed on the last thing he expected to find; a drop of blood. Several drops, in fact, leading up to a splotch of scarlet liquid on the professor's robes.

"Are you alright, sir?" Harry asked in more surprise than concern.

Snape figured out where Harry was looking, and flipped over his robes to conceal it, but not before Harry caught sight of the bloody gash in his leg.

"If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead," Hermione was still explaining to McGonagall, who didn't look quite as furious anymore.

"Blaise protected me, Harry jumped on the troll, and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to get help. It was about to finish me off when they arrived."

Harry and Blaise grinned at each other, and even Ron looked slightly proud of himself.

"Be that as it may, Miss Granger, five points will be taking for this," McGonagall said, and Hermione's mask almost cracked at the loss. "I'm very disappointed in you. If you're not hurt, you'd better get back to Gryffindor tower. Students are finishing the feast in their houses."

Hermione left to wait outside, her head hanging low.

"As for the rest of you," McGonagall addressed the remaining students who tried to hide their sudden panic, "You were very lucky. Not many first years could take out a fully-grown mountain troll and live to tell the tale. Five points-" the three winced "-will be awarded to each of you. Professor Dumbledore will be informed. You may go."

The group hurried outside to join Hermione, silently cheering. Harry tried not to smirk as Snape glared at him on the way out. He turned back to Blaise and laughed at a comment she made, completely missing the way Quirrell's gave sharpened for a moment and he sat up straighter, watching them leave with narrowed eyes.

"How did it go?" Hermione asked the when they ran into her pacing nervously in the hall. "You didn't lose more points did you? I can't believe I lied to a teacher! Oh, I hope Professor McGonagall doesn't find out what happened! This could end up on my permanent record! I could be expelled! They could-"

"Hermione!" Blaise grabbed the girl by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake, "Breathe, girl!"

She nodded, trying to take small breaths as she calmed down. To the side, Harry and Weasley watched in amusement, until each realized their close proximity and jumped about a foot apart. The two glared for moment, before the Gryffindor held out his hand brusquely.

"What this?" Harry raised an eyebrow at the way Weasley seemed to force himself to hold still.

"A truce, Potter. I guess you're not so bad, for a *Slytherin*," he used the term as though it was a curse word. "What I'm trying to say is, thanks, I guess."

"You're welcome, Weasley," Harry smirked, shaking his hand.

Weasley pulled away soon enough, and his glare returned, "But don't think this means we're friends."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Harry said, discreetly pulling on his sleeve when he heard Sneak asking if he could bite the presumptuous brat.

"I still don't trust you, Potter. I'll be keeping an eye on you," he threatened as he started to climb the stairs.

Harry held in a laugh at the way Blaise looked ready to strangle Weasley from behind. He noticed Hermione's hand gripped her arm in warning.

Once Weasley was out of any immediate danger, Hermione let go and moved to follow him. Smiling shyly, she said, "Congratulations with that spell, Ron."

His ears turned a shade of red to match his hair as he mumbled, "Thanks. I couldn't have done it without you. I'm sorry about before. Friends?"

Hermione's smile doubled in size, "Friends."

The two left, Hermione waving goodbye to the Slytherins over her shoulder.

Harry turned to Blaise once they were gone, "That was interesting."

Blaise snorted. "Interesting? If every Halloween is like this, I might start to consider transferring schools."

"Well, it was certainly better than plain old Mischief Night at the orphanage!"

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'd rather go without knocking out a troll next year," Blaise said dryly while Harry pouted. "And another thing," Blaise started, her voice rising, "what the hell was with that spell?"

"Oh, that was the one we were looking up in the library-"

"What happened to starting small? I don't think a troll counts as small!" she pointedly out hysterically.

"It was worth a try!" Harry said defensively.

"Harry," Blaise said in a voice of forced calm, "You still ended up getting swung about like a rag doll. Was that really worth it?"

Harry decided not to answer that. As they trudged down to the Slytherin common room, still bickering, Harry was at least thankful Blaise's mind was occupied. After all, he had forgotten her candy apple.

"AND WELCOME TO THE FIRST QUIDDITCH MATCH OF THE SEASON! SLYTHERIN VS. RAVENCLAW! CONDITIONS ARE GREAT TODAY, NOT A CLOUD IN SIGHT. RAVENCLAW IS PRESENTING THEIR NEWEST PLAYER, CHO CHANG, IN PLACE OF SEEKER CHAMBERS, WHO SUFFERED AN UNFORTUNATE ACCIDENT DURING PRACTICE WHEN A BLUDGER GOT LOOSE. NEVERTHELESS, THIS TEAM HAS TRAINED HARD, AND WE'RE ALL READY TO SEE THOSE SLIMY SNAKES TAKEN DOWN A PEG OR TWO-"

"JORDAN!"

Professor McGonagall's stern voice interrupted the commentary coming from the Weasley twins' friend Lee Jordan. It was probably for the best; Slytherin Captain, Marcus Flint, had a look in his eye that said he was going to ambush Jordan the second the game ended. He might even succeed if the smirks he received from the two heavy Beaters were anything to go by. It seemed Flint was a bit-er, violent, when it came to Quidditch. The bruised Ravensclaws figured that out soon enough.

"AND BRADLEY MAKES A MIRACULOUS SAVE! TAKE THAT, FLINT!"

"Has anyone else noticed that our Quidditch commentator is totally biased, or is it just me?" Blaise attempted to say over the shouting in the stands.

Ronald Weasley's voice could be heard from across the pitch as he cheered himself hoarse. Hermione sat next to him, attempting to concentrate on the book in her lap as she winced. Timid Neville Longbottom was on Weasley's other side, trying not to bolt.

"What do you expect?" Theodore Nott asked rhetorically. "Everyone knows how Dumbledore favors his precious Gryffindors, and McGonagall is the Deputy Headmistress."

"But don't forget Snape," Harry added. "He and McGonagall have some sort of grudge going on when it comes to house rivalry. I'm almost positive I saw them exchanging gold before the match..."

Blaise snorted, "Too bad Snape's going to have to pay up. Our team is rubbish!"

Sadly, it was true. The Slytherin team seemed to lose all cunning when it came to outmaneuvering the other team. They relied more on pure strength than natural talent. Terrence Higgs looked to be the smallest, but that was essential for a Seeker. Derrick and Bole, the Beaters, were like older versions of Crabbe and Goyle, though perhaps a bit more evolved. The Chasers consisted of Pucey, Montague, and Flint himself. Bletchley was the Keeper, and not a total loss, but he seemed to tire out easily. Or maybe that was attributed to the number of times Ravenclaw had taken possession of the Quaffle...

"It's their own fault, really," Blaise pointed out. "Flint goes right for the brawn, and neglects the brains. I mean, look! There's not a single girl on the team!"

Nott looked amused at her feminist outrage. "Well, why don't you try out next year?"

Harry shot him confused glance, "But there aren't any empty spots-"

"Doesn't matter," Nott shook his head, "You're forgetting that this is Slytherin. It's every member for themselves, and that includes Quidditch. If you can beat any of them," he gestured at the crowded sky, just as Flint gave a vicious grin and elbowed a Ravenclaw Chaser in the gut, causing him to drop the Quaffle, "then you're automatically in."

"So no problem then," Blaise tried to sound nonchalant, but she winced as Roger Davies stole back the Quaffle, and was cupping himself more than the broom a moment later. "Ouch."

The game only got dirtier as it progressed, not that it helped much. The Ravenclaw team looked determined to win, even if they were roughed up enough that a strong breeze might blow them over. The Snitch was still missing, and the score was 70-20 in favor of Ravenclaw. The two goals Slytherin *had* scored were out of pure luck.

Flint seemed to realize their chances were slim, because he decided it was time for drastic measures. All it took were some discreet signals that not even Madam Hooch noticed. The next thing anyone knew, the Ravenclaw Keeper hit the ground, and Derrick was holding his Beater bat casually as he floated behind the goal posts.

"FOUL! THAT WAS DELIBERATE! THOSE DIRTY, CHEATING-"

"JORDAN!"

Ravenclaw was awarded a penalty shot that Bletchley barely caught by the tips of his fingers. Hooch managed to revive the Ravenclaw Keeper before continuing. He flew, albeit unsteadily, back to his post, a trickle of blood running down the side of his face. Slytherin managed to get in a few goals, which wasn't saying much as the opposing Keeper was seeing double. Soon the score was 70-60 to Ravenclaw.

Harry looked around the stands, yawning. The daylight was waning, and it didn't seem like the game was about to end anytime soon. Blaise was still on her feet, screaming at the players. She was lucky someone hadn't hexed her yet. As Nott had pointed out, it probably wasn't a good idea to yell obscenities at your own team. She ignored him anyway.

Blaise had gotten off to an okay start with Harry's new friend. He'd introduced them at breakfast that morning. Well, actually, Nott sat down and greeted them both. Blaise told him to sod off and pass the maple syrup. She wasn't really a morning person. Other than that, they got along well enough. Okay, they argued a bit... a lot. Nott seemed to take great pleasure in disagreeing with Blaise about everything from History of Magic ("Goblins don't eat chocolate, nor do they sing." "Are you sure? Maybe they just don't do it in public...") to the staircases ("They're evil, I tell you!" "They're magical." "What's the difference? They're still out to get me!" "No they're not- whoa!" "HA! I told you!" "I'm sure that was just a coincidence. They move all the time." "Then why is that suit of armor laughing at you?")

Harry almost felt left out for a while. At least, until Blaise charmed Nott's longish brown hair a vibrant pink. The boy really should have known better... She still refused to turn it back, or tell him how she

did it. As a pureblood, Nott appeared disgusted with himself when he couldn't find the counter-curse.

"AND SLYTHERIN SCORES AGAIN, TIEING THE GAME WITH 70-70. IT'S GOING TO BE A CLOSE ONE TODAY. AND RAVENCLAW REGAINS THE QUAFFLE, LET'S HOPE THEY CAN BREAK THE SCORE. MONTAGUE COMES UP BEHIND DAVIES-HEY! IS THAT THE SNITCH?"

Lee Jordan cut himself off abruptly, causing the majority of the people in the stands to look up in excitement. This was it; whichever team caught the snitch would win. Obviously, the two Seekers were well aware of that as they sped across the pitch at dangerous speeds.

Higgs and Chang flew neck and neck, even going so far as to ram one another in their pursuit of the tiny winged ball hovering just out of reach. Higgs had an almost desperate sneer on his face as he strained his arm forward. Obviously, he knew his days in Slytherin house wouldn't be pleasant if he lost.

All over the stands, students were shouting wildly at their Seeker. For once, Blaise was actually silent as she craned over the railing anxiously. Only Nott's grip on her robes kept her from taking a dive into the next row.

Harry stood up as well, his emerald eyes flickering as he followed, not the players, but the Golden Snitch. He watched the blurred shape take a sharp turn, dropping to go even faster. The sun glinted off the gilded surface as it spun in midair, the light shining through transparent silver wings. He kept his gaze steady, even as it was disrupted by billowing blue robes, clashing with dark green. The Snitch came back into sight a moment later, clutched tightly in a small hand. The Ravenclaw Seeker lifted her prize in triumph, and Lee Jordan's voice boomed over the field.

"CHO CHANG HAS CAUGHT THE SNITCH! RAVENCLAW WINS 220-70!"

Three of the four houses began screaming, drowning out the boos of the fourth. Blaise flopped back into her seat dejectedly, nearly sitting on Nott in the process.

"Damn! We were this close," she held the fingers of her right hand less than an inch apart. "I'm definitely trying out next year! Someone's gotta show these morons how it's done! What do you say, Harry? Harry?"

Harry was still staring captivated at the Snitch, thinking, *'This is what I'm going to do next year. I want to be a Seeker.'* Suddenly, he looked up, and his eyes met those of the pretty Asian girl still hovering on her broom.

Harry's mouth suddenly went dry, and he had a funny feeling in the pit of his stomach. He realized he was still staring and looked away, hoping he had suppressed the automatic blush. Then he realized Blaise was calling his name. Getting tired of his lack of response, she finally waved a hand in front of his face.

"Earth to Harry? You in there, or should we assume you're under some kind of spell and need to see Snape for a cure right away-"

That caught his attention, "NO! I'm fine-"

Behind Blaise, Nott snickered at his friend's obvious distaste for their Head of House. He had noticed the professor's sudden darkening of mood whenever the duo entered a room. It wasn't any of his business, but he did find the usual confrontations worth watching.

Speaking of Snape, as the trio followed the crowd off the Quidditch field, they caught a glimpse of the scowling man as he deposited several gold coins into McGonagall's waiting hand.

"I can't believe we lost!" Blaise groaned as they passed by Hagrid's hut on the way back to the castle.

Harry paused to wave to the man before pointing out, "Actually, it was pretty obvious we were doomed from the start. Let's just hope our team does better in the next match."

"They never used to be this bad," Nott frowned, "From what I heard, not only has Slytherin won the House Cup for the past several years, but we've also dominated in Quidditch."

"The only reason they probably won was by beating the crap out of the other team's Chasers," Harry said.

Nott conceded, "True. But we came pretty close to winning today. It's all because of that Seeker, Higgs. The bloke is bloody useless. The only reason he's even on the team is because they couldn't find anyone else small enough. Most of the people in the upper years are Crabbe- and Goyle-sized."

"Well, then we won't have to worry next year."

Both of his friends turned to Harry with questioning looks. "And why is that?" Nott asked, already having some idea of his answer.

"Because I'm going to be the new Seeker," he said with a smug grin.

Someone behind them snorted at that moment, and Draco Malfoy sauntered forward, his two goons lumbering behind him, "Really, Potter? You? A Seeker? That's a laugh."

"Why is that, Malfoy? Because you know I could beat you?" Harry asked lightly.

"In your dreams, Potter," the blonde boy spat.

"You forget, Malfoy," Nott interrupted, stepping forward to back his new friends, "he's already beaten you once with that Wronski Feint in flying lessons-

"Wonky-what?" Blaise whispered aside to Harry.

Malfoy didn't bother to answer, only sneering at him, "Pathetic, Nott. Making friends with blood traitors now? And I thought your family could sink no lower-

Harry watched in some surprise as his friend's hands fisted angrily.

"Take that back-

"He could do plenty worse, Malfoy," Harry cut in smoothly, "He could be friends with you, after all."

Malfoy's face flushed and he reached for his wand. Both Harry and Blaise grabbed theirs as well at the threatening movement.

"Oi, Malfoy!"

The entire group paused in their upcoming fight to look behind them.

Blaise smacked her forehead in frustration, and Harry would have done the same if he wasn't so worried about what would happen next. Ronald Weasley ran forward, ignoring Hermione as she begged him to turn back before they lost points.

"What do you want now, Weasel?" Malfoy snarled, "I'm too busy to play right now, so you'll have to find someone else to keep you occupied."

"What are you up to now, Malfoy?" Weasley barked, his own hand-me-down wand already in the air. Behind him, Hermione was rubbing the place between her eyes and sighing.

It was at times like this that Harry was more grateful than ever the Sorting Hat hadn't put him in Gryffindor. Granger had some sense at least, but Weasley was an idiot who couldn't help rushing in without thinking.

"It's none of your business, Weasley. Go back to the hole you crawled out of." Seeing the red head's face turn a shade parallel to his hair, Malfoy continued, "Oh, sorry, that would be a bit too upper-class for you, wouldn't it?"

Weasley stepped forward with an unpracticed sneer, "Look who's talking, Death Eater! How does your father get all his money anyway? It should have run out ages ago with all the bribes he's paid to stay out of Azkaban!"

"Really?" he drawled, seemingly unconcerned with the accusation. "At least it's going to good use. Someone has to weed out all the filth in the wizarding world." At this, he raked his eyes over both Gryffindors.

Ron's teeth clenched and he lunged forward. Both Crabbe and Goyle moved to block their leader, but they needn't have bothered, as the rabid Gryffindor was hauled back by the hood of his cloak. Hermione's grip was surprisingly strong for one her size as she scowled at the fuming boy.

"Ronald Weasley! Are you trying to get detention again?" she scolded.

Their audience watched in amusement as Weasley backed down. It seemed Granger was the perfect leash when it came to his temper.

Malfoy snickered, "You should listen to the Mudblood, Weasel. You wouldn't want to get hurt after all."

"I could take you anytime, Malfoy!" the boy announced, oblivious to the exasperated looks of his peers. Harry exchanged a glance with Hermione. It was obvious that the majority of the Slytherins and the lone Gryffindor were in perfect agreement for once.

"Fine then, Weasley. I challenge you to a wizard's duel!"

Even Malfoy's lackeys looked caught off guard at the declaration. Ron seemed gobsmacked before he shut his gaping mouth and smirked. He seemed perfectly confident of the situation going in his favor. Harry rolled his eyes. It was nice knowing Weasley... wait, scratch that.

"I accept."

Later that night, Harry and Blaise sat in the Slytherin common room, waiting, as always, for the rest of their housemates to clear out. Nott had already gone up to bed, saying barely a word as he left. His two friends were left to exchange worried looks behind his back. It wasn't hard to figure out that something about Malfoy's comment had unsettled the boy. Harry was tempted to ask, but he knew it was none of his business. They were still more like casual acquaintances than close friends. If Nott wanted to talk about it, he would. Unfortunately, as Blaise had pointed out, it was unlikely that he would be coming to them any time soon. He was a Slytherin after all, and a proud one at

that. Everyone in their house had their share of secrets, and it was simple instinct to preserve them.

It wasn't until midnight, and quite a bit past curfew, that the last prefect wandered up to bed, sending a suspicious glare at the pranking duo still wide awake in front of the fire. As soon as his bathrobe whipped out of sight, Harry and Blaise stood up. Both were dressed in casual muggle clothes. They grabbed their wands, and pulled on the wrinkled black cloaks they had been sitting on the entire time. After all, it would be chilly outside this close to winter.

Blaise pushed open the stone portal, watching as Harry paused to stare pensively at the boys' staircase. He knew that there was at least one Slytherin still up, but he wasn't anywhere near the dungeons. Draco Malfoy had slipped out some time after dinner, a smirk on his face, and Crabbe following mechanically behind him. He was presumably going to meet Weasley for his duel. Harry had to wonder how that was going...

Blaise tapped her wand against the wall impatiently.

'Oh, well,' Harry thought, 'I'll just have to wait and see who ends up in the hospital wing tomorrow morning. At least Jordan will have some company...'

According to the Hogwarts rumor mill, which was usually more or less accurate, Lee Jordan had in fact been ambushed after the Quidditch came. He was unfortunate enough to be found by Filch after Flint and Bole left him hanging from one of the Quidditch goals. The Slytherin captain had not taken his loss well. It didn't help when Oliver Wood spent most of lunch roaring with laughter as the Weasley twins imitated some of the Slytherin team's less graceful moves. Terrence Higgs was still missing in action. The failed Seeker had tried to make a run for it after the game. Harry hoped for his sake that he made it further than Jordan had.

Harry and Blaise made their way up toward the main entrance, leaving behind the dark dungeons. The trip was uneventful except for a near run-in with Snape. The man was headed toward his own classroom, but it was difficult to be as afraid of the old bat when his normal billowing stride was hindered by a fading limp. Harry had told

Blaise about that night in the bathroom, when he had glimpsed Snape's bloody leg. He could only assume the git had met up with Hagrid's dog. Harry and Blaise didn't waste time sympathizing. They did wonder what he had been up to on Halloween. It couldn't be a coincidence that the same night a troll was on the loose in the dungeons Snape had the sudden urge to visit the third floor.

The question still was, what could be so important that Dumbledore would hide it in the forbidden corridor, guarded by a three-headed dog, and underneath a trap door with Merlin-knows-what?

Harry and Blaise hoped to answer that question sooner or later. Since the search for Flamel was going absolutely nowhere, they planned on stopping by to see Hagrid again. It wasn't like this was a life or death situation for Harry and Blaise. They were just curious... Besides, Dumbledore should have known better than to tell the duo something was off limits. That pretty much guaranteed they had to find out what it was.

"Got it!" Harry whispered triumphantly as he managed the unlocking charm in one try. After the night they ran into Fluffy, he had been sure to have it memorized.

Smirking at Blaise, he pulled open the door to the Quidditch shed. He winced as the magical torches automatically lit up upon entry. With his eyes closed, he missed the shadowed form that scurried past his legs. He ushered Blaise inside and shut the door, hoping no one had noticed the bright glare.

Looking around, Harry felt like a kid in a candy store. There were dozens of brooms mounted along the walls. One side seemed to be in better condition though, as they belonged to students on the house teams. Of course, it was also likely they were jinxed so no one but the owner could remove them. A pair of Cleansweeps in the back even had a set of heavy shackles on them.

'Must belong to the Weasley twins...'

The other side of the shed was another story. At least twenty very plain, uniform brooms were stuck to the wall. They were rather old

fashioned compared to the models most young wizards were flying. In fact, Harry might have mistaken them for muggle cleaning supplies if not for the way one sparked off every now and then.

'Besides,' Harry mused, running his hand along an old stick with what looked like a bundle of straw tied to it, 'Aunt Petunia wouldn't be caught dead with one of these.'

"Hey, Harry! I found them!" Blaise's muffled yell came from the back of the shed, where she was buried in a magically expanded box. At least half of her body was hidden from view, and she was still straining to reach inside. Grinning, she stood up, her arms hugging a large red ball.

"Catch!"

Harry caught the Quaffle in the chest with a small oomph, glaring when Blaise snickered. Sticking out his tongue childishly, he tucked the ball under one arm and went to examine the brooms. A moment later, he had chosen a slightly bent Shooting Star. It was missing a few twigs, but it was that or the broom next to it, which was held together by a hefty roll of spell-o-tape. Harry recognized it as the broom Finnigan had been riding in flying lessons.

"Hurry up, Blaise!" he called when she had yet to choose one. She was pacing around the small room, frowning as she discriminated amongst the tattered brooms. Finally, she spotted whatever she was looking for, and snatched one down. It didn't look very different from any of the others, but Blaise was petting it with a fondness disturbingly reminiscent of Filch and Mrs. Norris.

"Er, do you two need a moment alone?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow at his friend as he stood with his hand poised to open the door.

Blaise pushed past him, nose in the air as Harry laughed. Still teasing Blaise as she threatened to smack him with her little friend, Harry followed her outside. The lights went off as he stepped onto the grass. Slit-pupiled eyes widened as the creature inside dashed toward the closing door. When barely a foot away from freedom, the door

latched shut with a resounding click. The frantic animal wasn't able to stop before its momentum carried it forward with a loud thump.

"Hey, did you hear something?" Blaise asked, trying to get Harry off the subject of her broom. She looked suspiciously back toward the Quidditch shed.

"Nice try, Blaise!" Harry held up the Quaffle he was still carrying. "Let's get started already! I'd like to get *some* sleep tonight!"

Blaise shrugged, dismissing the sound, and trotted onto the field to catch up with her friend. "You are so going down, Potter!"

"In your dreams, Zabini!" He leapt onto his broom and sped into the air, Blaise not too far behind.

Back in the deserted shed, a scruffy cat with scarlet eyes butted its head against the closed door. She growled at the immovable surface, all the while hearing the sound of disobedient children laughing. If only she could get to her master... Then they wouldn't be laughing anymore. She scraped her claws against the thick wooden door in one last futile attempt. Alone in the dark room, Mrs. Norris meowed petulantly.

"And Zabini scores again!" Blaise shouted triumphantly into the empty pitch as she did a victory lap around one of the goal posts.

"Oh, get over yourself!" Harry snarled in irritation as he touched down on the grass to pick up the fallen Quaffle.

So far in their imaginary Quidditch match, Blaise has beaten him by at least six goals. It was obvious that Harry's talents lay in other areas of the sport; something that did not involve catching or throwing the ball. Blaise was using the opportunity to rub his faults in his face as much as possible. It wasn't everyday she bested her friend at something, as Harry always beat her by a couple points on a test, no matter what the subject.

Harry himself was taking the pounding on his pride with good sportsmanship... until she started her own celebration dance. It was

all he could do not to tackle Blaise once she started doing a twisted version of the macarena on her broom while trying not to fall off.

Blaise claimed he was a sore loser. Harry replied in a huff that it wasn't his fault... He blamed his glasses. How could he be expected to have perfect hand-eye coordination while wearing the same scratched lenses the Dursleys had grudgingly bought him when he was three?

"Sure, Harry, whatever you say," she answered condescendingly.

Harry began to growl at her, but stopped as an idea formed in his head. Snatching up the Quaffle, he spurred his broom up to greater heights, shooting past the stationary Blaise, who yelled out in surprise. Smirking, he held up the red ball and called, "Come and get it!"

Blaise took the bait and brought her broom upwards, following with the same speed he had risen. When she was nearly level with him, Harry took the chance to dive, leaving Blaise still rocketing upward. He dropped like a stone, only coming to a halt twenty feet up from the pitch... and coincidentally, right in front of the circular hoop. Laughing at the look of outrage on Blaise's face, Harry casually tossed the ball underhanded, watching as it dropped through the goal.

"Show off!" Blaise yelled down. Harry only stuck out his tongue in response.

"Damn!" Harry cursed as the Quaffle sailed straight through his outstretched fingers. He'd only missed it by inches! He twisted around on his broom, watching as the flying ball continued its progress, sailing outside the pitch... and into the forest.

Harry groaned, burying his face into his hands. Maybe he should just give up now? Forfeit while he still held onto the tattered remains of his dignity...

"Oi! Harry, go get the ball!" Blaise yelled from the other end of the pitch. She had one hell of an arm.

"Why do I have to get it?" Harry asked in what sounded suspiciously like a whine. "You're the one who threw it!"

"Yeah, but you were supposed to catch it!" She pointed out, grinning. "Hurry up!"

Harry grumbled to himself but obligingly steered his broom towards the lost Quaffle. He entered the dark forest with some trepidation. After all, there had to be a reason it was off limits to students... and the last time Harry had gone somewhere against Dumbledore's rules, he was nearly torn to shreds by a three-headed dog...

Harry gulped at the frightening turn his thoughts were taking. Maybe he should just turn back and tell Blaise he couldn't find it? Carefully, Harry alighted in the branches of a twisted tree. He crouched with his broom in hand, scanning the ground for a flash of scarlet...

Would she believe him if he said a werewolf ate it?

The unexpected sound of crunching leaves and rustling bushes caused Harry's stomach to drop.

He held his breath, holding the shaft of his broom in a white-knuckled grip. The noises were growing louder, accompanied by the distinct sound of human voices. Out of the dark shrubbery a cloaked stranger emerged, dragging a trembling figure with it.

"N-now, Severus..."

That stutter sounded familiar...

The first figure released the man, crossing his arms coolly, "You've been avoiding me, Quirrell..."

'*Snape!*' Harry realized with horror. His stomach dropped another several feet, and kept falling... Dimly, he wondered if it had reached China yet...

"Psst! Harry, what's taking so long?"

Blaise landed on the branch next to him, struggling a little as her cloak caught on a sharp twig. She stared strangely at her friend who seemed frozen in place. Harry was looking toward the ground with wide eyes. Before Blaise could speak again, he rounded on her, faster than she could see, and slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Hey, what-" she tried to protest.

He only clutched her tighter and glanced up to meet her irritated gaze. The hint of fear in his green eyes shocked her into silence. She watched as Harry lifted a finger in front of his lips, signaling her to be quiet. Then he jerked his head toward the ground. Blaise felt her mouth threaten to drop open, if not for her friend holding it shut, when she caught sight of her two least favorite professors standing right underneath them. She caught on to Harry's message just as Snape began speaking.

"Have you found a way past Hagrid's beast yet?"

Blaise gasped at the implications of that very question.

"B-b-but, Severus, I-"

"You don't want me as your enemy, Quirrell," Snape growled, taking a step closer to the fearful professor.

Quirrell flinched at the malevolence in his voice, but stood his ground, "I-I don't know what you-"

"You know perfectly well what I mean."

"H-how d-dare you-" Quirrell puffed up indignantly against Snape's threats. For a moment the silent audience felt something close to pride for the weak man...

"Oh, I dare, Quirrell," Snape smirked, allowing his right hand to drift towards the pocket of his robes. Quirrell's self-righteousness deflated in a heartbeat as he cowered at the sight of a wand, conveniently forgetting his own magical abilities.

'So much for that,' Harry sighed in disgust.

"Very well," Snape continued, turning his back on the quivering fool, "We'll have another little chat soon, when you've had time to think things over, and decided where your loyalties lie." With that he strode off through the trees, the billow of his robes the only thing to distinguish him from the gloom of the forest.

Both Harry and Blaise remained in the treetop, watching as Quirrell stayed standing in the clearing. He remained perfectly still for a moment, as though in shock, before he strode off in the same direction as Snape. If it had only been a little lighter, the two Slytherins might have noticed the way his bony fists clenched, shaking with anger. They also missed the way his narrowed eyes bore into the ground, gleaming with pure hatred...

They had a bit of difficulty finding their way out of the forest once they felt secure enough to leave their hiding place. Eventually, Harry just suggested they fly out, which worked fine until Blaise ran into a tree. They never did retrieve the lost Quaffle. Hopefully, Madam Hooch wouldn't notice its absence.

They finally entered the broomshed, replacing their borrowed brooms on the walls, where they magically stuck. Neither noticed the cat crouched beside the door. Mrs. Norris slipped out the second their backs were turned.

"I can't believe it!" Blaise hissed as the they exited the shed, replacing the locking charm on their way out.

"Which part," Harry asked dryly, "the fact that we just saw Snape threaten Quirrell in the middle of the night, or that Quirrell actually stood up to him for a second?"

"Neither!" Blaise pouted suddenly, "I can't believe we didn't get to finish our game! Bloody awful timing... I was so kicking your arse!"

Harry made an offended sound but didn't argue.

"Well, anyway, I guess we were right," he pointed out.

"About what?"

"The trap door on the forbidden corridor," he answered. "Fluffy is obviously protecting something. It must be big if Snape's trying to get ahold of it."

Blaise frowned in confusion, "But why would he want it?"

Harry didn't have a clue without knowing what *it* was, but he replied with a sardonic smile, "Well, we always knew he was kinda evil, so it can't be anything good..."

"Probably not. But what could Snape possibly need with Quirrell? I mean, the man doesn't exactly have his uses."

"He said something about Quirrell's 'hocus-pocus' before you showed up. He must be a part of whatever is being guarded. Hell, maybe all the teachers are."

"Does this mean it's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" Blaise asked with a sinking feeling.

The two exchanged a mutual look of despair as they walked toward the front entrance, but it was Harry who managed to say the words.

"We're screwed."

"You've got that right, brats."

They had just begun climbing the stairs to the castle when the voice interrupted. Both Harry and Blaise came to a halt, Blaise actually stumbling into Harry before she stopped. They turned around, as though in slow motion, eyes lifting to find the source of the comment.

Standing triumphantly in the walkway was Filch, arms cuddled around a smug Mrs. Norris. The purring cat had just directed her master to two very large canaries.

"You two are in for it now," Filch leered at the stunned children, "Caught outside after hours... breaking into the Quidditch shed... and trapping poor Norrie inside-"

Mrs. Norris gave a piteous meow then, prompting her owner to make several sickeningly sweet face as he pet her.

Harry gulped, wondering if now would be a good time to try out that binding hex he'd read about. *'Maybe we can still make a break for the dungeons? Sure Filch would come after us as soon as he gets free, his satanic little furball right behind him... but he'd need a password to get into the Slytherin dorms! And only our Head of House could give it to him-'*

Harry was going to stop thinking now.

"Now, what do you two have to say for yourself?" Filch growled, but the crooked grin on his face as he looked at them belied his excitement... and made the Slytherins worry.

Blaise squeaked as his gaze traveled into her. She was clinging to Harry's arm in panic. Her thoughts were a jumbled mess, still in disbelief that they were caught. She finally said the only thing she could come up with.

"We didn't do it!"

"This sucks."

Harry let his head fall onto the table with a small thud as the students sleepily ambled in for breakfast. The yawning Slytherins still struggling to put on their 'dignified Pureblood' masks stared at him dully before returning to their food.

"Tell me about it," Blaise grumbled, eyeing her lap as though it held her death sentence. Actually, seeing as she was holding a missive about their joint detention with Filch that night, maybe that wasn't too far off.

"What have you two been up to now?" Theodore Nott asked as he settled into what was becoming his regular seat across from them. He seemed a bit more cheerful than the day before, obviously choosing to forget about Malfoy's words.

"I heard you come in late last night, Potter, and you weren't the only one. Malfoy showed up at two in the morning, muttering his usual spiel about McGonagall and writing his father-

"Oh, no... no... no..." Harry ignored Nott's bewildered gaze as he punctuated each agonized word with the painful meeting of his face with the table surface. "They can't do this to us..." he moaned.

"What's the matter?" Nott looked to Blaise instead, slightly inching away from the preoccupied Boy-Who-Lived.

"This is a conspiracy!" Blaise burst out, aiming a seething glare at the oblivious headmaster. "We got detention for being caught out after curfew, the same night Malfoy and Weasley did," she explained, watching Nott put the pieces together as his eyebrows knit. "How can he even *think* of putting us in the same detention together? We'll be dead by morning!"

Nott gave a wry smile, "I doubt you need to worry about those two. Weasley barely knows which end of the wand to point, and Malfoy would never get his hands dirty enough to kill you. He might get Crabbe and Goyle to do it though..."

"It's not them we should be worried about," came Harry's muffled voice, as he became one with the hardwood finish. "At this rate, I may just commit suicide instead. Nott?" He raised his head weakly to address the boy. "If I die, you can take care of Sneak."

Nott raised an eyebrow at the dramatics. He'd already met the odd familiar. It was kind of hard to miss the screams when Malfoy found it in his bed.

"Don't worry, it's easy," Harry assured him. "Just feed him every once in a while, and make sure he doesn't pick a fight with Mrs. Norris. I'm afraid he'd probably lose."

"Hey!" The snake poked his head out of Harry's sleeve to comment, startling the other boy. Nott would never get used to that particular entrance.

Harry ignored Sneak, seeing as he was the only one to hear anything. He and Blaise still hadn't figured out why only Harry could understand him, and they'd decided it was safer not to tell anyone else, including Nott.

"So, what were you two doing outside in the first place?" Nott paused to ask as he spread jam on a piece of toast.

"We were trying to play Quidditch," Harry said. It was too bad Filch would be keeping a closer eye on them. He was dying to get back on a broom.

Nott snorted, "Figures. So, who won?"

Blaise opened her mouth to tell him exactly who won, but was interrupted by Harry's shoving a muffin in her mouth at that very moment.

"Look, Blaise! Blueberry, your favorite!"

While Blaise finished chewing, and making little sounds of delight, Harry gave exchanged a meaningful look with Nott. His green eyes were practically begging him not to ask.

"Um," Nott started awkwardly, trying not to stare at the way Blaise devoured two more muffins at the same time, "So, did you guys finish that assignment on vampires for Defense?"

Blaise choked while Harry looked thoughtful, "I knew we forgot something..."

The trio continued to chat over meaningless things for the remainder of breakfast. It was actually Nott who kept the subject away from the previous night, in hopes of distracting his friends from their detention, or as Blaise called it, 'impending torture.'

Their first class that morning was Herbology with the Hufflepuffs. The trio had ended up sprinting down the lawns when they realized that they had only ten minutes to get there. As they dashed down to the greenhouses, Hagrid waved from his hut. Harry waved back, inwardly wondering how they were going to get Hagrid to talk about Flamel. After the events of the night before, Harry had more questions than ever, and it seemed that the large man was the only one who could answer them.

They entered the class just in time, the even-tempered Professor Sprout sending them a brief look of warning before she began to lecture. Harry, Blaise, and Nott sat together at an empty table with a set of quivering shrubs placed on it.

They were pruning Flutterby Bushes that day, so the class went by relatively uneventful. Harry did notice Malfoy working with Crabbe and Goyle across the room. The pale boy looked tired and irritated, and seemed to be taking his frustration out on the plant. If he kept it up, there would be nothing left.

"Mr. Malfoy! I asked you to trim the leaves, not cut them all off! Five points from Slytherin!" Professor Sprout scolded him, snatching the clippers from his hands. The plant on his table seemed to shiver with relief, while Malfoy flushed angrily.

Back at their table, Harry and Blaise snickered at Malfoy's misfortune. Nott shook his head at their antics, but couldn't help but snort as well.

After Herbology, the Slytherins made their way toward Defense Against the Dark Arts. Harry and Blaise automatically took seats in the back, partially to get away from the unusual odor Quirrell gave off, but Harry also tended to get headaches whenever in his presence. Nott simply followed and sat next to Harry. He wasn't exactly eager for this class, and didn't see the point of sitting up closer when it was still impossible to understand Quirrell's stutter.

Pulling a roll of parchment out of his bag, Nott smirked at the other two. Blaise and Harry were both bent over a textbook, quills scribbling madly on their own sheets of parchment. Blaise seemed to be just copying the entire chapter, while Harry would paraphrase every now and then. Personally, Nott didn't see the point. Quirrell would have some trouble noticing the similarities when both students' writing was nearly illegible.

As Quirrell entered the classroom, both Harry and Blaise cast Drying Charms on the ink and rolled up their homework. Quirrell asked in his weak voice for the assignment to be passed forward, and both did so with triumphant smiles, although Blaise was slightly panting. Grabbing her left hand, she winced.

"Ooh, cramp..."

The class proceeded slowly, most students beginning to drift off as Quirrell described the ways to kill a vampire. Hearing him talk about the messier method of beheading them, Harry once again wondered how in the world their teacher could have ever fought Dark creatures for a living. According to some of the older students, Quirrell had been off in Albania, hunting vampires of all things, before he returned to teach at Hogwarts. Whatever had happened while gone had left him in his current pitiful state. All Harry had to say to that was that it must have been one hell of a vampire.

Next to Harry, Blaise was staring blankly at the front of the room, her eyelids fluttering shut every now and then, before snapping open again. On his other side, Nott had chosen to read the textbook rather than listen to Quirrell. Most of the Ravenclaw students had the same idea, although one or two were taking notes as well.

Having nothing better to do, especially since the textbook was just as dull as the lecture, Harry decided to do something about the question he had been pondering all day. Pulling out a scrap of parchment, he scribbled a note and slid it in front of his drowsy friend.

What should we do about last night?

Blaise glanced at the note, before hastily answering, with a frustrated look on her face.

Why do we have to do anything? So, Snape threatened Quirrell, who cares? So, there's a freaking monster on the third floor... and yeah, it's guarding something that Snape wants to steal-

Harry raised an eyebrow as he read over Blaise's shoulder. In return, Blaise stopped writing before continuing with a pout.

But why do we have to do something! I'm sure Dumbledore has it all under control-

Harry interrupted her.

Blaise! Come on, the old nutter may be manipulative, but he doesn't know everything! Just look at me! It took him six years to even check up on me and realize I wasn't with my-

Harry's hand shook and the quill dug into the parchment.

-loving relatives!

Okay! I get your point... But we still don't have any idea who Flamel is, or what Fluffy's guarding. We must have checked more than a dozen books in the library, and we couldn't find any mention of the guy!

Harry bit his lip in thought before writing.

About that, I think I have an idea. What if we asked for help?

What! You want to tell someone? Who? Hagrid's out of the question since he'll just tell us to mind our own business, and there's no way I'm asking Gryffindors for help! Weasley's an idiot, Hermione would

tell a teacher, and the twins would probably try to go down there themselves! It's not like we can ask any of our housemates either! I trust them about as far as I can throw them- without magic.

How about Nott? He's seems trustworthy enough, and he is a Pureblood-

Blaise snorted.

Yeah, and what's so great about that?

Well, he's been in the wizarding world a lot longer than we have, that's for sure. Maybe he's heard of Flamel. For all we know, he could be quite well-known, and we're just clueless.

Blaise sighed in defeat, knowing her friend's mind was already made up. Nott really wasn't that bad, at least when he wasn't arguing with her. On the positive side, if Nott knew who Flamel was, it meant Blaise wouldn't have to spend another minute in that dreaded library. Madam Pince was still giving her odd looks every time they sat at a table to do homework.

Fine. When do we tell him?

Harry smiled in relief, glad she had agreed.

How about this afternoon? We'll wait until classes are over so no one overhears us. He's usually up in the dorm by that time.

Just as planned, Harry and Blaise made their way back to the Slytherin dorms after lunch. Nott had already separated from them a while ago, intent on whatever it was he usually did. He seemed to be fiddling with his wand an awful lot on his way out of the Great Hall.

"Cupiditas." Harry said the password to open the wall. He was glad this one was less prejudiced than the others. After all, 'ambition' was rather mild compared to the other passwords of 'Mudblood,' 'death to the impure,' and 'behead the lion.' Although, Harry had found a certain fondness in that last one.

The common room was filled for once, students from all years cluttered in small groups as they worked on homework or just talked. The atmosphere was still pretty quiet, though, as Slytherins were always careful about what they said. They had to be when you could never tell which side someone was on. Even with the Dark Lord dead, it wasn't the smartest thing to announce your loyalties in public.

Only one corner of the room was making much noise. It was a group of first years with Pansy Parkinson at the center. She was speaking animatedly to her friends who hung on her every word. Every now and then, the girls would burst out in giggles.

As Harry and Blaise passed, Pansy shot them a sneer, which Blaise returned whole-heartedly. Ignoring them, Harry led his friend into the boys' dormitory. A few people had found out it odd for Blaise to be up there, but by now they were used to it. The duo was inseparable, and it wasn't like they could hang out in Blaise's room. Harry still remembered the bruises from the sliding staircase.

Going up the short set of stairs, Harry pushed open a door, revealing a long hallway lined with an emerald green carpet. There were eight doors spaced out long the walls, each one leading to another dorm. The students were separated by year, and each had their own bathroom to share. The door at the very end of the corridor was placed there for the occasion that Slytherin had a Head Boy.

Reaching for the door labeled 'First Years,' Harry paused and cocked his head to the side. There was a low voice coming from inside. It seemed rather frustrated. Signaling to Blaise, Harry turned the knob and opened the door slowly, making as little noise as possible. They inched around the doorway, scanning the empty dorm for the source of the noise. Catching sight of Theodore Nott, it was hard not to fall down laughing on the spot.

"Finite Incantatem!" A loud groan of frustration was heard when nothing happened.

"Reverto!" Nott tried again, jabbing his wand. Nothing.

Holding in their giggles, Harry and Blaise crept inside, shutting the door softly. Nott was standing in front of a large vanity, staring at his

reflection, specifically his still neon pink hair. Every now and then, he would close his eyes in concentration before trying another spell to change it back. Then he would look up to the mirror hopefully before growling and trying again.

"Verus Color!"

Throwing down his wand, the normally calm boy glared at his hair, "Change back already!"

"Need some help, Nott?"

Nott spun around in shock, only to find both Harry and Blaise reclining on one of the beds, arms crossed, and smirks on their faces. In the second it took his brain to catch up with what he was seeing, Nott turned a paler shade of his hair and tried to hide his wand behind his back. As he was standing in front of a mirror, it was kind of redundant.

Blaise let loose a snicker at Nott's misfortune, which graduated into full blown laughter a moment later. Harry couldn't help himself and joined her a moment later.

"Oh, bummer off!" Nott snarled. Striding toward his own bed, he sat down with a huff. "Was there anything you wanted, or are you just here to mock me?"

"S-sorry," Harry apologized as he reigned in his amusement, "We did actually want to talk to you. That is, if you're not too busy?" He raised an eyebrow at Nott's pink hair.

The boy sighed, "Nah, there's no point anyway. Go on, say whatever you have to say."

Harry and Blaise exchanged a glance.

"Go ahead, Harry," Blaise gestured, "It was your idea anyway."

Harry started speaking, beginning with his and Blaise's visit to the forbidden corridor. Nott didn't seem surprised that they had gone up there, although he did pause in shock when they told of the giant

three-headed dog. His reaction to Hagrid's pet was very similar to their own.

"*Fluffy?*"

Harry then proceeded to tell him of their talk with Hagrid, the attempted robbery at Gringotts, and the mention of Flamel. Nott's eyes continued to grow wider with each statement. It was obvious he had never expected the kind of trouble his friends could get into, even if the proof was right in front of him. They ended their tale with the night before. Harry explained what they'd heard between Quirrell and Snape, with Blaise adding the occasional derogatory mark towards both teachers.

When they finished, Nott could only blink in shock before he gathered his wits.

"So, you're telling me that Dumbledore's hiding something in the third-floor corridor that's being guarded by Hagrid's pet Cerberus, and you think Snape wants to steal it? And he needs Quirrell's help to get it?"

Both nodded.

"Why in the bloody hell are we getting involved?" Nott asked bluntly.

"That's what I said!" Blaise crowed.

"Look," Harry said, tired of explaining himself, "I just think it's something we should keep an eye on. Besides, if Snape is trying to get it, and Dumbledore went to so much trouble to keep it safe... It's got to be important! For all we know, it could be dangerous!"

"But why would he keep something like that in a school?" Blaise wondered aloud.

"Well," Nott pointed out reasonably, "Next to Gringotts, Hogwarts is one of the most well-protected places in Europe."

Nott continued to muse for a moment, then asked with a trace of confusion in his voice, "But why did you guys decide to inform *me* of all this?"

"Cause you're our good friend?" Blaise said with a brilliant smile.

"Right," Nott replied dryly, "What do you want?"

"Okay," Harry figured they might as well get it over with, "We were wondering if you've heard of this Nicolas Flamel. Hagrid mentioned him by accident, but when he realized what he'd said, he completely closed up."

"Practically blackmailed us into silence, too," Blaise added.

"And ever since, we've been in the library trying to look him up. We haven't found anything so far. He wasn't listed under 'F' or 'famous wizards of the twentieth century,' either."

"Hmm," Nott frowned, "He sounds familiar... but I can't think of where I've heard of him."

Blaise groaned, "Back to the library."

"Well, I suppose I could help you guys look," he suggested airily, "for a price."

"What?" Harry asked suspiciously. He should have known the Slytherin would want something in return.

Pointing at his vibrant hair, Nott glared at Blaise, "Fix this."

"Oh!" Blaise shrugged sheepishly, "I guess I could do that..."

"Good. Now undo whatever hex you cast on my hair, because I've tried every spell I could think of, and none of them have worked-"

"That's because I didn't charm your hair," Blaise smirked.

Both Harry and Nott turned to her with blank stares.

"Uh, Blaise, incase you haven't noticed, his hair is bright pink... and you did it," Harry said slowly, as though speaking to someone abnormally dim.

"I know that, Harry!" she snapped. "But I didn't use magic on his *hair*," Blaise smiled evilly, her gaze traveling in the direction of the bathroom, "I hexed his shampoo."

"Wha-" Nott gaped at Blaise before sputtering, "You mean- every time I washed my hair-"

"You were just making it worse!" Blaise laughed.

Harry started snickering at the look of outrage on Nott's face. Then the boy turned an accusing finger toward Harry.

"You! You helped her!"

"How did I do that?"

Nott jerked his thumb toward the bathroom door, "You're the one always letting her up here!"

Harry shook his head, "I never saw Blaise go in there."

The two boys turned to the still cackling brunette.

"Harry didn't have to help me," she said, lifting her head up arrogantly. "Believe me, I have my ways..."

Nott growled, but stood up and walked into the boys' bathroom. They could hear him shuffling around as he took the spell off his shampoo. They could also hear him doing a sweep of every other grooming supply that belonged to him.

"Relax, Nott," Blaise called after him, "I didn't do anything else!"

The boy finally walked out, seemingly relieved to know that he would be rid of the hideous pink hair dye as soon as he washed his hair again. Sorting through the trunk at the foot of his bed, he grabbed a change of clothes.

"I'm going to take a shower," he directed this statement toward Harry. "As soon as I'm done, I'll help you guys look for Flamel. While I'm gone, keep her-" he pointed to Blaise "-away from my stuff."

"No problem," Harry assured him. Normally Harry would let Blaise have her fun, but Nott had suffered long enough.

Nodding gratefully, the other boy hurried into the bathroom and locked the door. Just as he stepped under the warm water, he heard Blaise's voice yell out.

"By the way, Nott, nice rubber ducky!"

"Still nothing!" Blaise made a movement as though to slam the leather-bound book into her forehead, but had second thoughts when she heard Madam Pince clearing her throat. Sighing regretfully, she placed it back on the table, looking toward her friends as a means to vent instead.

Neither Harry nor Nott looked much happier over their lack of success. Harry was growing more agitated with every failed trip to the library, while Nott was just sick of being glared at by the librarian. She hadn't seemed to give him a second glance until he walked into the library with the other two Slytherins. Oh, well, there was no love lost between them.

Harry groaned as he checked the time. Standing up, he placed the useless books in a stack. "C'mon, Blaise, we need to get going for," Harry made a face, "detention."

Nott laughed at Harry's expression. "Well, if you dislike it so much, you shouldn't have been out after curfew."

The boy looked scandalous, "What, and miss out on all the fun?"

"No, Harry," Blaise said seriously, "Nott's right."

Both of her friends paused at that, staring at her with disbelief.

"There's only one way to make sure we don't get detention again," she said with determination.

Harry gasped in horror. "No! Blaise you can't possibly mean- You want us to start following the rules?"

Blaise snorted. "No way! We'll just have to make sure we don't get caught anymore."

Harry looked relieved that his pranking partner wouldn't abandon him. Nott just threw up his hands in disgust, "You two are hopeless. I don't know why I even bother to talk to you."

"Aww," Blaise pouted, leaning into his face, "Don't you love us?"

"Keep telling yourselves that if it'll make you feel any better," Nott replied with a dry smirk. "Now don't you have a detention to be getting to?" He added, glancing pointedly at the clock on the wall.

Harry's eyes grew wide, and he jumped out of his chair, dragging Blaise with him. "Damn! We're late!"

Blaise eep-ed. Grabbing their bags, the two bid Nott good-bye and took off running through the double doors, ignoring Pince's yell to slow down.

Harry and Blaise raced down multiple staircases, heading for the entrance hall. For reasons neither could comprehend, they had been told to report at the main doors for their detention with Filch. It was odd since his usual detentions involved cleaning while he prattled on about his dreams of restoring the old punishments of whips and chains.

Harry shuddered. No, not at the thought of Filch's kinky side. He was actually picturing the entire hallway, and being forced to clean it without magic. Now that was scary, especially if they had to spend the whole night in the company of Malfoy and Weasley.

"Where are we going?"

Harry jumped. He had actually forgotten that Sneak was wrapped around his arm. He was always coming and going when he felt like it, so Harry had just stopped paying attention.

"Blaisse and I have detention," Harry whispered, conscious of the fact that his friend was listening in, but more worried about anyone else who could be roaming the halls.

"Then take me back to the dungeons," Sneak hissed in a commanding voice.

"What? Why?" Harry asked, irritated.

"Because I don't want to go," Sneak said as though it were obvious.

"Well, too bad, you can come anyway."

"What!" the snake exclaimed.

"You're getting lazy enough as it is, Sneak," Harry said, not letting him off easy. *"Besidess,"* he smirked, *"You need to get out more often."*

Sneak gave the equivalent of a snort. *"No, I don't."*

"Yes, you do."

"No."

"Yes."

"NO!"

"YES!"

"NOOOOOOOO!"

"YEEESSS-"

"Uh, Harry, what are you doing?" Blaise raised an eyebrow at the two. Harry was glaring at Sneak, who was baring his fangs in challenge.

"I told Sneak he has to come with us, and he's complaining-"

"Am not! Harry'ss being mean to me-"

Harry scoffed, *"Oh, don't be ssuch a baby-"*

"I am not a baby, you filthy human!"

"Looks who's talking, dirty sserpent!"

"How dare you-"

"Oh, I dare-"

"That'ss it! I'm going to bite you!"

"Bring it on, sscaly-"

"Hiiisssss!"

Just as Sneak lunged towards his face, Blaise grabbed him around the neck, scowling at both of them.

"Will you two just shut up already! I have no idea what you're saying, but even I can tell you're both acting like idiots!"

"Hey!"

"Hey!"

"Now, the two of you will apologize," Blaise demanded. Harry and Sneak gawked at her before bursting out in argument.

"No way-"

"Abssolutely not-"

"I said, apologize!" Blaise snarled, blue eyes glaring.

"So sorry, old chum-"

"It'ss all in the passt-"

"Hmph," Blaise smirked in a satisfied way at her cowed friends, "that's more like it."

"Move along, brats, we're running late enough as it is." Filch scowled at the four students as he led the way down the dark lawns, lantern held high.

Both Malfoy and Weasley walked right behind him, keeping a five-foot distance between each other while throwing dirty looks every step of the way. Harry and Blaise followed at the back. Harry was still pouting and ignoring his snake friend. Blaise had taken to sighing and glaring at Filch alternately.

As she sighed again, Harry snapped, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," Blaise mumbled kicking a loose stone in her path. Suddenly, she raised her chin and said, "I can't believe we're stuck doing detention with this lot! It's just not fair...!"

Harry rolled his eyes at her. "Well, maybe we wouldn't be in this situation if you'd given Filch a better excuse-

"Like what?"

"I dunno, anything would have been better than 'we didn't do it!' Honestly, Blaise was that the best you could think of?"

"Hey! I don't do well under pressure!"

Harry mumbled something that sounded like an agreement.

"What did you say?" Blaise asked threateningly.

"Nothing!"

"What are you two on about?" Ron slowed down, frowning.

"Nothing!" Harry repeated.

"Then how come-"

"So, how did that duel go?" Blaise interrupted, looking interested.

Weasley blanched, "W-well, er-"

"I won, of course," Malfoy boasted, overhearing the topic of conversation.

"What!" Weasley's ears flushed bright red, and he began yelling, "No, you didn't! You didn't even show up for the bloody duel!"

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"He tricked me! Left me waiting in the trophy room for Filch!"

Blaise snorted.

"It's not my fault you were stupid enough to fall for it, Weasel," Malfoy sneered. "Anyone with half a brain would have known better. Besides, why would I want to waste my time on a pathetic excuse of a wizard like you?"

Weasley snarled, but thankfully he didn't have a chance to do anything. It would have been amusing, sure, but Harry didn't want to get in trouble again. He had more important things to do than spend another detention with those two morons... like revenge. Mrs. Norris was the cause of all this, and as soon as he found the time, she was going to get it...

"There yeh are, Filch!" Hagrid's voice boomed as he met the group. Looking around, Harry was startled to see that they were standing right outside the forest.

"What took yeh so long?" Filch opened his mouth but shut it as Hagrid continued. "Never mind. I'll take 'em from here. C'mon you lot, let's get started!"

As Filch hobbled back toward the castle in a foul mood, Blaise turned to Hagrid and smiled innocently.

"Hey, Hagrid! How's is going?"

"Nice try, Blaise. Yer not gettin' out 'o this one. Tonight we're goin' into the forest-"

"What!" Malfoy gasped, seeming paler than usual. "We can't go in there! There are things in there that could kill us!"

Weasley gulped and Blaise winced. Harry tried to hide his own unease, especially after remembering that he'd been in there just the other night.

"Well, then yeh shouldn't have been out breakin' school rules, now should yeh?" Hagrid said, taking no pity on them.

Walking towards the boundaries of the trees, he bent down over a shimmering puddle. Dipping his fingers in the substance, he brought them into the light, covered in a silvery liquid.

"See this? This is unicorn blood. Sommat in there's been killin' them. Whatever left this has been hurt bad, and we're gonna find it and put it outta its misery."

After that brief, and frightening, explanation, Hagrid urged the reluctant students forward, leading them onto a nearly invisible path through the forest. He warned them not to stray off it, not that any of them had plans to.

"I wonder what's attacking the unicorns," Blaise pondered aloud as they weaved around a particularly large tree with splatters of the silvery blood.

"I don't know," Harry whispered, "but whatever it is, I don't want to meet it. Unicorns are supposed to be nearly impossible to catch."

Blaise shuddered, "And they're sending a bunch of first years after it? We so did not deserve this!"

After a time, the thin trail split into two, and Hagrid directed Malfoy and Weasley down one side, while he took Harry and Blaise down the other. Malfoy made sure to tell the giant he wanted Fang for protection. Harry tried not to laugh out loud at that. Fang, despite his namesake, was a bloody coward.

Hagrid pushed past the excess foliage with ease, as Harry and Blaise stumbled after him, trying to keep up. The trio walked in silence for the moment, until Blaise decided to make small talk.

"So, Hagrid, seen Fluffy lately?"

Harry was hard pressed not to trip and fall flat on his face at Blaise's blunt question.

Hagrid himself looked at her suspiciously before replying, "Oh, he's fine. Gettin' a lil' upset at bein' cooped up all the time, though."

Blaise pouted sympathetically, "Poor thing. I can see how awful it would be staying locked up in one room all the time. But he's got an important duty to do. Someone has to guard it after all-"

"Now, see here, tha's none of yer business-"

"Oh, but we're just curious, Hagrid," Harry jumped in as he saw the situation deteriorating. "After all, it must be important if Dumbledore trusted you to help protect it!"

Hagrid blushed deeply, but looked pleased by the praise.

"Yeah, it must be really powerful!" Blaise added, "I guess size really doesn't matter, though-"

Hagrid seemed frustrated by their persistence. Nevertheless, he continued to walk ahead, his irritation obvious by the stiffening in his broad shoulders.

"Yeah, it was only about this big," Harry held up his hand with his forefinger and thumb only a few inches apart.

"Wow, that's *tiny*," Blaise commented.

"For something so small, I'm surprised it needs a whole corridor to itself-"

Hagrid's ruddy complexion was turning a darker shade of red by the second. He was torn between bellowing at them angrily and wanting to pretend he hadn't heard a word.

Luckily, Hagrid was saved the decision when the forest was lit up by a distant shower of red sparks, signaling that the other half of their party was in need of assistance. A loud boom echoed through the forest a moment later, followed by a cloud of thick smoke covering up the previous sparks. Looking far too eager to be off, Hagrid ordered them to stay put before charging off the path alone. Listening to the crashing sounds as he moved away, Blaise sighed regretfully and snapped her fingers.

"Darn, we were actually getting somewhere!"

Harry shrugged unconcernedly, "Yeah, well we weren't bound to get very far. It was worth a try, though."

"If only we could get Hagrid to loosen up or something!" Blaise frowned thoughtfully, "I wondered if he ever drinks..."

Before Blaise could finish that disastrous train of thought, Hagrid reappeared with the two boys and Fang, a deep scowl hidden under his bushy beard. Both Malfoy and Weasley looked a little worse for wear and out of breath. Weasley's robe was torn in several places, and Malfoy had the beginnings of a black eye. They also had traces of first year spell damage. It was hard to miss the color charms and- Oh, was that a *Furnunculus*? Who knew that the Weasel had it in him?

"What happened?" Blaise asked.

"Found those two tryin' ter start a duel!" Hagrid glared down at them, "We don' have time ter be foolin' around in here! It's dangerous enough as it is! Now, we gotta get a move on, it's gettin' late. Ron, you go with me an' Blaise this time. Harry, you're with Draco and Fang."

Weasley looked no happier at the change. Blaise, on the other hand, gave the red-haired boy an evil-looking grin, causing him to pale and

take a worried step behind Hagrid. Harry and Malfoy just sneered at each other but kept silent, eager to get back to the castle.

Snatching up a lantern, Malfoy stalked off angrily. Harry held back a snort when he noticed something on the back the blonde's robes that he had yet to notice. It read "*Chudley Cannons for the Cup.*" Harry shook his head. Whistling softly to Fang, he went after Malfoy at a sedate pace.

"Hey, Malfoy! Slow down!" Harry called after the boy still pushing his way through the trees with a temperamental fervor. He needn't have bothered, for Malfoy halted abruptly. Harry thought it was in response to his own order, until he saw something shining on the ground. Was it more unicorn blood? They had been finding much large puddles of the stuff, hinting that they may be close to finding the animal.

Finally arriving at the clearing, what Harry saw was much worse than a bloody unicorn. He covered his mouth to stifle a gag, and beside him, Fang whimpered. Malfoy echoed the dog, only with more fear in it.

There, looming over the dead unicorn, was a sight more gruesome than Harry could ever imagine, and that included the time he caught Cromwell singing in the shower. A rail-thin figure shrouded in a dark cloak was hunched over the stiff carcass and making hungry slurping sounds.

"Eeeewww... I think I'm going to be ssick..."

At Sneak's hissed groan, the figure froze. The shadowed face flicked up sharply in the direction of the terrified watchers. Its face was obscured except for two narrowed red eyes, glowing dimly in the light of Malfoy's lantern.

The stranger stood up swiftly, with a predator's grace. The two groups stared at one another, hardly daring to breathe. It was Fang who made the first move, growling deeply, but backing away. The cloaked face turned towards the dog with a gesture of disdain, before its gleaming eyes settled on Harry.

"Potter..."

Harry gasped as his scar gave a sudden throb. The figure stepped toward him menacingly, and Harry's mind scrambled for something, anything, to do. He didn't know what that thing was, but he knew they had to get out of there, and fast. The pressure in his head forced him to double over, clutching at it in agony. He grit his teeth and gave a small moan.

Behind him, he heard Malfoy scream and take off running. The lantern he'd held hit the ground with a crash, the small flame inside spreading to some dry leaves. Fang bounded off as well, his howls echoing through the forest. Sneak unraveled from Harry's wrist, shrieking something about every snake for himself.

'Now there's loyalty for ya,' Harry thought with sarcasm, as he bent over further, his hands digging for purchase in the dirt as he squirmed in pain.

The fire from the lantern was spreading, sending a burning smell to his nose, and the figure continued to approach. Harry thought he heard the distant beat of hooves.

Glancing up, watery green eyes clashed with red, and a trickle of something like recognition ran through Harry's mind, even as his headache doubled in ferocity.

As the figure pulled out a wand, Harry panicked. He was so dizzy, he doubted he stood a chance... Did he even know any spells for this type of occasion? Damn it, this wasn't some silly kids' duel! A *Ritusempra* wasn't going to save him now! He closed his eyes in frustration, and felt something within him swelling...

Throughout the haze, he never noticed as the small fire near him began to move in a controlled arc, burning with a white hot intensity as it made a line separating the two. It burned higher, forming a barrier. Harry was too distracted to see the figure stumble backwards from the heat and flee into the forest. He only looked up as he felt the ache in his scar recede, and by that time, the wall of flame had shrunk and begun to smolder slightly on the damp ground.

Feeling confused, and strangely drained, Harry stood up on shaky limbs, just as an equine shape burst into the clearing. He fell back to the ground with a small *oomph*, and stared in shock at the half-man, half-horse that was watching him with clear blue eyes that held something akin to awe.

As Harry pushed himself up tiredly, he observed this new creature, which he recognized instantly as a centaur. It was a male, though his age was hard to tell, with a palomino hide and pale torso. He had long silvery-blond hair pulled back with a leather thong.

The centaur began to speak to Harry, a small frown on his face as he introduced himself. "My name is Firenze. You should not be here, Harry Potter. The forest is not safe for one such as you at this time," his eyes drifted toward the dead unicorn as he said that.

Harry didn't bother to ask how the centaur knew his name. "Yeah, I kind of figured that out for myself," he muttered, still a bit dazed. "What was that thing, and why was it *drinking* the unicorn's blood?"

Firenze began to explain to Harry, using mostly vague descriptions, after he convinced the boy to climb on his back. They traveled quickly through the forest as they talked, and Harry figured out that all this was just another part of a larger mystery. It all went back to what was being guarded by Fluffy. He also realized that the situation had taken on a whole new level of danger because there was a very good reason to keep the small package safe. Voldemort was back, living off unicorn blood to survive, and he wanted to steal it for his own nefarious plans. Suffice to say, Harry would do all it took to keep him from succeeding.

A short while later, they came across two other centaurs, who glared at Harry as though he were nothing more than the dirt on their hooves. The one called Bane seemed furious at Firenze for interfering with the stars or something. While Harry watched the two bicker with more emotion than Firenze had shown all night, he turned to the third centaur, Ronan, who could only shake his head and mutter about Mars being unnaturally bright.

'*It's official,*' Harry thought as they set out once more, Firenze still fuming from the encounter, '*All centaurs are barmy.*'

"I don't think your friend likes me much," Harry commented.

Firenze nodded and slowed the gallop they had been moving at. "No, Bane does not think well of outsiders in our home. He also does not approve of meddling in the affairs of humans. But I could not leave the Boy-Who-Lived to die, regardless of the planets."

"So, how did you find me?" Harry asked, choosing to ignore the savior remark.

"It was quite strange, but a small serpent told me," he answered.

"Sneak!" Harry exclaimed. "How did you find him? Where is he?"

"The one you call Sneak was hurrying through the forest when I came upon him. I heard a strange hissing and looked to investigate. Your friend was hysterical and screaming something about being too young to die. His other words are ones I would not deign proper to repeat."

Harry rolled his eyes before something occurred to him, "Wait! You could understand him?"

Firenze nodded before saying with a raised eyebrow, "Yes, we centaurs have the ability to communicate with most creatures of the forest, but how is it that you can?"

"I have no idea," Harry said truthfully. He and Blaise had given up researching on that front when it seemed their only chance was the restricted section of the library. That wasn't about to happen any time soon.

Firenze gave Harry a searching look before continuing, "He managed to calm down long enough to point me in your direction. I believe he went back to the grounds keeper."

Harry was falling asleep by the time they reached the outskirts of the forest. The centaur halted just in sight of the castle. Harry slipped off his back, yawning thanks, just as he spotted several people arguing by Hagrid's hut.

"This is where I leave you, Harry Potter." Firenze bowed shortly before trotting away.

As Harry walked toward the others, he heard the annoying grate of Weasley's voice as he fought with Malfoy once again. Hagrid was pacing with a crossbow in his hands as he looked worriedly toward the trees.

"This is all your fault!" Weasley snarled at the pale boy. "I bet you had it planned from the start to off Potter!"

"Oh, please, Weasley, like I would ever-"

Blaise shook her head at the two. "Give it a rest already! If anything, it's Harry's own fault if he got into trouble. That's just the way he is. He doesn't know how to stay out of trouble!" She laughed slightly, but the unease in her voice was audible.

"Hey, I resent that!"

"Harry!"

Blaise shrieked, and tackled him in a suffocating hug. Harry blushed at the raised eyebrow from Malfoy, and a glare from Weasley who had obviously not changed his opinion of Harry one bit.

'Gryffindors...'

As soon as they were back in the dungeons, Harry didn't hesitate to fill Blaise in on the night's events. He told her about the attack, Firenze's words, and Voldemort. Blaise was understandably upset, but mostly at how close her friend had come to harm. She hid the majority of her worry by smacking him over the head once she finished hugging him, and making him swear that he wouldn't get into any more trouble without her there. After all, someone had to save his arse. Harry laughingly agreed to the demand, and the two went up to bed.

The next day, there was a noticeable tension about the two, who felt like the Dark Lord could spring at any moment. Theodore Nott was

unusually solemn as well after being filled in. His family was still suffering the after-effects of the last war, even if he hadn't yet brought himself to tell his friends about it. Overall, the Slytherin duo decided to blow off some steam the only way they knew how: causing mischief. They even managed to rope Nott into helping, if only so Blaise would quit bugging him.

All next week, Hogwarts was hit with a storm of pranks from unknown origin. The Weasley twins weren't taking any credit, although they seemed to find the whole affair extremely entertaining. The majority of the student body had to agree. The victims seemed perfectly random from an outsider's point of view, but a few had suspicions of a connection. After all, it couldn't be a coincidence that Draco Malfoy was found dressed in drag one morning, or that Ronald Weasley marched into the Great Hall with a song and dance routine in the middle of lunch. Even Snape turned up sporting a matching set of golden lion ears and tail, along with a satin collar complete with bell.

By far, though, the one prank that had all of Hogwarts in stitches, was when Filch was seen stalking the halls with Mrs. Norris yowling unhappily under his arm. The beast that had gotten on the bad side of generations of students was now taken down a peg or two after she woke up completely shaved. Blaise and Harry had taken personal vengeance with that one. No one snitched on them and got away with it.

"Will you two hurry it up? We're going to be late for class." Theodore Nott leaned impatiently against the stone arch over-looking the Quidditch pitch. He was on the completely wrong side of the castle for someone who had ten minutes to get to Charms. Instead, he was standing around with the two Slytherin oddballs, waiting for their latest victim to turn up.

"C'mon, Nott! Where's that prankster spirit?" Blaise asked cheerfully, ignoring the scowl he sent her in return.

"Gone, thank Merlin. I still have no idea what came over me." Running a weary hand down his face, Nott groaned, "I can't believe I gave my Head of House cat ears... Do you have any idea what Snape will do to me if he ever finds out?"

Harry turned around from his post, a genuine look of contemplation on his face. "Hmm, probably stun you-"

"Gut you-" Blaise added without the least bit of worry.

"And use your innards for potion ingredients!" They finished together in a sing-song tone.

Nott stared at them in disbelief. That was really creepy...

"At least, that's what Fred and George told us," Harry explained, turning back to watch the crowded corridor.

Nott was truly surprised no one had come to question them yet. Even that Weasley prefect knew better than to leave Potter and Zabini alone for two minutes.

"You really need to stop hanging out with those two Gryffindors," he remarked. "They're a bad influence."

Harry snorted. "Oh, we don't need any influencing!"

"Yeah, you should have seen us before Hogwarts! Our reign of terror is legendary!" Blaise was staring upward with a look of remembered triumph as she clenched her fists in the air.

"Yeah, we've actually been pretty lax in our duties since we got here-"

"It's disgraceful!"

"But what can you do?" Harry shrugged.

"Prank, prank, and prank some more!" Blaise cackled madly. Even Harry was compelled to back away slightly.

"You're both bloody insane!" Nott once again questioned why in the world he was there.

"Only slightly."

"Speak for yourself, Blaise."

"Hey!"

Nott shook his head in denial, just as a pair of fifth year girls walked out of the nearby bathroom, giving the trio strange looks. Nott laughed nervously, "Heh heh, I'm not with them..."

"Of course you are!" Blaise grinned, throwing an arm around his shoulders suddenly, and almost causing his knees to buckle.

"Face it, Nott," Harry added, "you're stuck with us."

"Oh, woe is me," Nott replied with only half sarcasm.

Harry was suddenly distracted by the appearance of a female Slytherin. At least, Nott had heard she was a girl, but he sometimes thought she more closely resembled his grandmother's pet Crup.

Pansy Parkinson sauntered out of the bathroom, adjusting her bag and smoothing out her short black hair. Two of her groupies followed, gossiping rudely about someone named Eloise Midgen.

"Could you believe her? What was she thinking wearing that piece of rubbish?" The curly redhead on the right asked, flipping a lock of hair over her shoulder.

"I know! It was atrocious! Of course, nothing she wears would ever help her look any better. That face of hers is horrendous!" The blonde on the left giggled as if she had said something funny.

"Yes, well not everyone can look as beautiful as some," Pansy put a hand on her hip arrogantly.

From beside Nott, Blaise growled quietly. If he remembered correctly, those three were a few of her roommates, and they didn't exactly see eye to eye. Harry wasn't paying much attention to his friend, except to place a restraining hand on her shoulder, as he aimed his wand toward Pansy.

"*Squamosus*," Harry whispered, jabbing his wand and giving it a little twirl at the end.

"Pansy, look at your face!" The redhead, Daphne, gasped and pulled out a small hand mirror, holding it toward Pansy. The other girl, Tracy, was trembling as she waited for Pansy's reaction.

There was a piercing shriek that forced all three of the hidden watchers to wince in pain. Pansy screamed as she saw her reflection, frantically touching her face. At that moment, Nott could no longer say she looked like a dog. Her skin was covered in mottled yellow and green scales. The girl looked like a diseased Harpy, and her shrill voice only added to the image.

Blaise snorted loudly, bent over in near hysterics. Harry grinned at the successful spell. Nott's suspicions about that book the duo was always carrying were now confirmed. They certainly hadn't learned that spell from Quirrell.

Pansy suddenly looked up, hearing a thump as Blaise slid to the floor on her knees in laughter. The jinxed girl bared her teeth angrily, and for a moment, Nott wondered if she would sprout Harpy claws too.

"ZABINI! POTTER!"

Blaise stopped laughing abruptly, and blanched at the screeching thing barreling toward her, "Oh, sh-"

"RUN!" Harry shouted, taking off without a backward glance.

Blaise jumped to her feet as well, obviously used to such escapes. Nott followed hastily, not wanting to be anywhere near Pansy Parkinson for the next few days. The three panicked Slytherins dashed down the corridor, Pansy's curses echoing behind them. They could hear her two friends trying to help Pansy calm down- not that it was working.

As Nott ran, he clutched a stitch in his side and watched the two pranksters laughing as they fled from certain doom. They still found the entire thing hilarious. Nott could only gasp out between breaths, "Why... me...?"

"Now, class, what I'm about to show you all is a nifty little charm," Professor Flitwick explained in his cheeriest tone after taking the roll call. "It is a conjuration of blue-tinted flames. What makes them different, and far more useful than the common fire spell is that these are portable and waterproof, and can last for an indeterminable amount of time, depending on the strength and intention of the caster. Once created, they can simply be gathered up in a regular household jar, and carried around for light and heat."

Climbing onto his self-made podium of textbooks, Flitwick prepared for a demonstration. "The incantation is *Indigaflammo*, with emphasis on the 'ga' and 'mo,' and requires an upward spiral of the wrist, as well as a delicate flick downward at the intended location of conjuration. I do ask that you please refrain from pointing at your classmates."

While Flitwick raised a bushy eyebrow at the class at large, Blaise snickered into her hand, and Harry tapped his wand into the palm of his hand suggestively while glancing at a certain group of his fellow housemates. Particularly the one with a helmet of super-gelled blonde hair. Nott groaned silently into the tabletop.

"Now, watch closely!" Flitwick rolled up the excessive sleeves of his teaching robe and began the wand movements. Pointing at a small silver dish on his desk, he cried, "*Indigaflammo!*"

A jet of sapphire flames were released from his wand, gathering in, but not expanding past, the borders of the dish. The fire crackled merrily when he was finished, seeming to glitter with sparks of violet at intervals.

The class clapped obligingly at the display, and pulled out their own wands to begin.

"Hmm, that doesn't look too hard," Blaise muttered aloud, chewing at her lip in thought.

"Really?" Harry asked sarcastically. "Then why don't you give it a try?"

"Fine, I will!" Blaise announced stubbornly, and began the spell. *"Indian-flannel!"*

Nothing happened.

Blaise crossed her arms and pouted, Harry burst out laughing, and Nott rolled his eyes before flicking through the Charms text for help. He snorted when he finally found the chapter, and told Blaise in a scathing tone, "You said it wrong."

"No, I didn't!"

"Yes, you did."

"No!"

"Yes- Argh, what am I doing?" Nott asked himself with a disgruntled look on his face. "I refuse to participate in such a childish argument. I'm right, you're wrong, end of story."

"No, it's not, and you will participate in this childish argument until I win!" Blaise informed him.

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will."

"No."

"Yes."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No- Argh, not again!"

"HA! I WIN!"

Feeling rather left out of things- and on second thought, relieved at that- Harry worked on casting the spell himself.

"Let's see... upward spiral... downward flick..." He didn't really pay attention to where his wand was pointed, figuring that it wouldn't work the first time anyway. After all, the rest of the class seemed to be having little to no success. Even Granger was still checking over her notes with a frown on her face.

"Indigaflammo!"

Harry was struck by a feeling of deja vu as a warm tingle traveled down his arm, and exited his wand with far more force than he had expected.

A shriek went up from the Gryffindor section of the classroom as Ronald Weasley patted frantically at his sleeve in an attempt to put out the blue-bell flames. Granger looked gobsmacked for a moment when she realized that water wouldn't put it out, then started flicking frantically through her book. Professor Flitwick finally had to help them out, and even he looked puzzled when the flames refused to go out until he doubled the power of his counter charm.

The Slytherins were laughing uproariously, as well as several Gryffindors until they realized one of their own had been targeted by a snake, and then every head turned in the direction of where the spell had first been cast.

Harry ducked down without haste, pretending to be preoccupied in finding something in his bag. Blaise and Nott were still locked in their argument, but froze when they noticed all the eyes on them.

Blaise blinked owlishly at the sudden attention. "Um, hi?" She waved her hand weakly until Nott shoved it back down.

Harry was snickering under the desk when he received a sharp kick from Blaise. "OW!"

After that slight distraction, where Slytherin barely escaped with their points intact as no one had witnessed the spell actually being cast, the class period moved by fairly uneventful. A few more students managed the spell, Blaise being one of them to her great delight- until she realized that Nott had done it first.

"I don't believe it! And I'd almost had it that time! If it wasn't for Harry here, I could have figured it out sooner!"

"Hey, what did I do?"

"You- You-" Blaise fumbled for an excuse "-You distracted me!"

"When?" Harry asked indignantly.

"Er, when you set Weasel's robe on fire!"

"Blaise, that was over twenty minutes ago," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, well, every time I tried to cast the spell, I just kept getting this image in my head- You know, of Weasel squealing and trying to keep from ripping his clothes off-" She couldn't continue at that, and collapsed into giggles.

Harry had to admit that was very distracting, but Nott disagreed. "I saw that, too, but I'm simply blocking the disturbing images from my mind, so you have no excuse. I beat you fair and square!"

"Triumphing over a blood traitor isn't much to be proud of, Nott," an annoying voice drawled from the table nearby. "Of course, I suppose it wouldn't matter one blood traitor to another."

Nott seemed to be very focused on ignoring Malfoy as he silently picked up his quill and started writing notes on the spell. Harry, however, noticed that his quill was on the verge of snapping as it nearly tore into the parchment with the pressure he was putting on it.

"What, not going to reply, Nott?" The blonde didn't even try to keep his voice down and a few of the other students stopped what they were doing to listen. "I'm not surprised. Cowardice does run in the family, after all..."

Nott's entire body stiffened at the remark, and Harry frowned worriedly. Blaise scowled at Malfoy and snapped, "Why don't you just shut up!"

Malfoy sneered. "I see Nott's finally found someone else to fight his battles for him. Like father like son, eh? She won't last long either-"

"Stuff it, you little-"

"Stop."

Nott interrupted her, his voice more frigid than Harry had ever heard.

Blaise tried to protest. "But-"

"No. Just stop it, and mind your own business, Zabini."

Blaise gaped at him wordlessly. From behind her back, Harry spotted the other Slytherins whispering to each other.

"Well, *excuse* me! I was only trying to help!"

"I don't need your bloody help!" Nott slammed his Charms book shut, causing Blaise to jump at the noise. Harry narrowed his eyes at the other boy's behavior. It was past time that he intervened, before Nott said something he would come to regret.

"Get a hold of yourself!" he growled, trying to keep his voice low. Their group was already attracting enough attention, and Malfoy and his friends were reveling in it. "I think you should apologize to Blaise. That's no way to treat a friend-"

Nott had obviously had enough, stressed out as he was. He stood up abruptly and began shoving things into his bag. "We are not friends, so quit believing otherwise!"

With that, he stormed out of the room, pushing through the Gryffindors, and ignoring Flitwick's shouts to sit down unless he wanted a detention. It had no effect on the furious boy, and he disappeared after slamming the door. They heard him run into Peeves outside, and curse the annoying poltergeist, before the sound of his angry footsteps faded away.

The rest of the class broke out in exclamations over the scene they had just witnessed, and Flitwick tried to restore order, to no avail. Malfoy and his goons laughed raucously.

At their own lonely table, Harry and Blaise were unusually quiet. Harry's eyes were filled with a calculating light as he watched the other Slytherins converse, and he caught stray words like 'traitor' and 'father.' He decided that a long talk with their new friend- regardless of what Nott said- was long overdue. Beside him, Blaise just stared into her lap with a forlorn expression.

By some miracle, Nott actually turned up for History of Magic. Harry didn't know why. If he was the one having a nervous breakdown, he'd happily skip Binns' class. Regardless, the boy was sitting stiffly in his usual seat, fourth row from the teacher's desk. He seemed a bit calmer now, although even less sociable than normal. Taking a chance, Harry and Blaise filed into the room with the rest of their classmates, and settled into a pair of desks as near as they dared, back two and over one seat.

Harry settled in and pulled out his book and some things to take notes, only taking a moment to glance at the other boy when he was sure Nott was too far absorbed in his own thoughts. He was glaring ahead at the chalkboard as though it had smothered his owl. At least his wand was still in his pocket... Harry revised that thought to 'not for long' when he saw Malfoy and the newly glamoured Pansy Parkinson swagger into the room behind some Hufflepuffs. And Pansy had to be

under a glamour. Harry knew for a fact that his spell was set to hold for the next twenty-four hours. The book had said so.

Soon class began, or nap time for most, and Binns started his lecture. Harry wasn't quite sure what it was about... something to do with goblins probably. Blaise was sitting nearby in a slightly maudlin mood as she doodled pictures on her half-finished notes. Really, all the parchment contained was the date, the name of some war, and then a multitude of pudgy stick figures with pointy ears and fangs that seemed to be holding some sort of violent revel. If Harry wasn't mistaken, that darkly inked puddle she was currently scribbling in was blood.

'Ah,' he realized, 'the goblin war of 1645. And there's Flargnock the Vicious bashing in the enemy sentry's skull... Then again...' Harry paused, absently tilting his head to see the drawing at another angle, *'that could be Weasel... or an oompa loompa...'*

Okay, so Blaise wasn't the most skilled of artists.

"Stupid jerk... Who does he think he is... Show him... Only trying to help..." Blaise was muttering to herself as she added another gory splotch of blood to the unidentifiable victim.

Harry winced. Maybe it was supposed to be Nott.

"Psst!"

Blaise continued in her desecration of the unnamed doodle. Now she was sketching out a guillotine... and writing something... Harry's eyes widened over the messy letters with an arrow pointing towards the person.

THEODORE NOTT

"Psst! Blaise!" Harry hissed in her direction. "Snap out of it!"

"Huh?" Blaise blinked up at Harry in surprise. "You say something?"

Harry fought against the impulse to smack himself in the head.

"Look, Blaise, don't you think you're taking this a little hard?"

She still looked oblivious. "What are you talking about?"

Harry cleared his throat and gestured to the massacred drawing.

"Oh... that..." Blaise drew out the words as though contemplating them seriously. "Um, no."

She picked up her quill, only to realize it was bone dry. "Hey, Harry, think I could borrow some of your ink?" she asked, already digging through his bag.

Harry rolled his eyes. "No. Blaise, just listen. I think we should give Nott the benefit of the doubt. It's obvious that whatever Malfoy was saying really affected him."

"Yes, Harry," Blaise said slowly as though he were thick, "but Malfoy says stuff to us all the time, and it's not like we take it to heart."

"True," he conceded. "But this wasn't just regular insulting. Whatever that git was talking about, the other Slytherins understood. Didn't you see them talking about it? Malfoy must know something about Nott-something we don't- and it's probably not good."

"Well, why wouldn't he just tell us if something was wrong? He didn't have to yell at me like that!" She glared toward the aforementioned boy, and kept rummaging for that ink.

"Blaise, we haven't known Nott for very long. He has no reason to just blurt out all his secrets to us," Harry tried to point out.

"But we're his friends!" She protested, but then Blaise's corrected herself bitterly, "Oh, never mind, apparently we never were. I suppose we're just people he puts up with on a daily basis... who sit with him in classes and at meals, who share homework answers, and participate in pranks..." Blaise stopped looking for the ink. "And who taunt the Weasel together... and argue with Malfoy..."

Harry blanched. Blaise looked like she was going to cry. He couldn't handle crying Blaise, especially not in a room full of people who were

starting to notice her mumbling. She was still quiet enough that they couldn't make out individual words, but it wouldn't last.

"... and snoop in the l-library together... and j-joke around together... and... and... AND I'M SORRY I TURNED HIS HAIR PINK! I D-DIDN'T MEEEAAN IIIT!"

Blaise was now sobbing into her arms, while Harry patted her shoulder awkwardly.

Binns had stopped droning, and the rest of the class glanced over at the pair. Even Nott looked like he was listening in, although he didn't turn around. Harry rubbed the back of his head nervously and shrugged, "Heh, bad dream..."

Binns spoke up in a raspy voice different from his usual monotone, "Miss Zabinski, please refrain from sleeping in my class. This lesson is particularly important. The same goes for the rest of you!" He swept a transparent arm around the room toward all of the half-dozing students. "General Sharpstone's last stand will be on your test next Monday, so be sure to pay attention!"

The only students still awake nodded agreeably, but laid back on their desks the second he turned back around. With that brief interruption over, Binns went back to teaching.

"Blaise! C'mon, don't do this to me," Harry pleaded in a whisper. He was never very good with teary girls. Blaise usually wasn't this emotional, but he knew how much she valued friendships. When you came from an orphanage, every one counted. She had never handled rejection well. Harry still recalled the one real fight they had ever had. It was a few years ago, when Harry had sworn he would never speak to her again. His solemn vow had cracked as soon as the first tears fell, and they had made up within an hour. That one argument had begun because Harry had a nightmare, and Blaise had pried into his business when he refused to talk about it-

'That's it!' Harry realized. 'This is exactly like that! Nott is hiding something, and Blaise tried to get him to open up...'

Well, even understanding how the other boy felt, Harry wasn't going to let the situation just drop. He had felt much better just knowing someone was there for him when he did finally let Blaise in. Nott was still their friend, and they had to show him that, whether he wanted them around or not. Harry still remembered his words earlier that day, spoken in a joking manner during their prank...

'Face it, Nott, you're stuck with us.

It was eerily silent on the grounds of Hogwarts that afternoon, except for the gusty November breeze howling through the Forbidden Forest, and the brisk chatter of a group of Ravenclaws just getting out from Herbology. Three Slytherin first years sat huddled under a large Beachwood beside the lake, detached from the small show of life. The group was unusually quiet, almost alarmingly so when one took into account just who they were.

It did not bode well to see Hogwarts' most dangerous duo, just after the famed Weasley twins, so solemn and unassuming on a day when the sun was shining, classes were over for the day, and the mountain of homework could wait until tomorrow. What might further cause the student population to speculate would be the open rift between Potter and Zabini and their newest cohort. A mere three hours after a spectacular disruption in Charms class, and the rumor mill was going wild. It wasn't everyday that one heard the naturally serious Theodore Nott shout in anger, or watched the ever-cheerful Blaise Zabini burst into sudden tears.

Harry really hadn't improved the gossip by petrifying Nott in a crowded hallway and dragging him out onto the grounds with Blaise in tow. They were just lucky that Snape had been otherwise preoccupied with terrorizing some Gryffindors, or they may have found themselves short a good deal of house points.

When he was finally released, Nott scowled at Harry from his seat on the ground, not deigning his ire worth vocal projection. Harry just looked back benignly, seemingly unconcerned by the twin holes being burned in his direction as he idly twirled his wand. Blaise glanced back and forth between the two before staring down at her wringing hands in an uncommon show of nerves.

"So," Harry said at last, drawing out the word as he waited for someone to start. "Anything you want to get off your chest, Nott?"

Blaise looked up hopefully from her fingers. Was he going to tell them now? Would he finally explain what was wrong so they could all go back to pranking, teasing, and causing general mayhem...?

Nope. He was still glaring. Blaise pouted in frustration.

"Are you *sure* there isn't anything you want to say...?" Harry wheedled. "I hear talking about your issues can be very therapeutic," he added in a knowledgeable tone.

Nott snorted and turned his attention toward the lake in an obvious dismissal. He watched as the water rippled, and caught the silhouette of the giant squid drifting by.

Blaise grit her teeth as neither boy spoke nor moved. Harry began to tap his wand against his leg in boredom.

TAP...

Nott sighed loudly.

TAP...

Blaise's right eye twitched.

TAP...

The squid released a few bubbles that broke the surface.

TAP...

"ARGH!" Blaise roared, fisting her hands into her hair. "I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!!"

Both boys flinched back as Blaise turned wild eyes on them, nearly foaming at the mouth. She lunged for Nott, who didn't manage to dodge in time, and grabbed him by the shoulders of his outer robe. She began shaking him as she screamed into his face. Harry could only sit back in shock and slight fear. Maybe he should leave Blaise to work out Nott's issues alone... He would be back at the castle in one piece by morning... probably...

"TELL ME WHAT THE BLOODY HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU!" Blaise demanded. Without giving him a chance to respond, she continued at full volume.

Harry was sure those Ravenclaws had sprinted the rest of the way to the castle. He wished he could join them.

"I- AM- YOUR- FRIEND!" Each word was punctuated by another jolt of Nott's head. Backward... and forward... and backward again... Blaise was going to sprain something soon. "SHARE- YOUR- PAIN!!!"

"Er- Blaise?" Harry interrupted hesitantly. "I think he's suffering a little more pain than he can share at the moment..."

Blaise came to her senses long enough to notice the dazed look upon Nott's face as her grip on his clothes was the only thing still holding him up.

"Oh! Sorry," Blaise apologized gruffly, releasing the poor boy at last.

Nott flopped backwards onto the grass, gasping slightly as he recovered. He finally opened his eyes, only to narrow them again in irritation as he found the other two looming over him in concern, in Harry's case, and controlled anger in Blaise's.

"It might help to talk," Harry prodded again, and then added in a lower tone, "before I have to restrain her."

The sound of Nott's teeth grinding in frustration was barely audible before he sat up in defeat and prepared himself for a rather trying conversation.

"Fine," Nott growled, "you want to know what my *problem* is? You want to know why I'm so *upset*? You want to know why Malfoy and his cronies TREAT ME LIKE A BLEEDING COCKROACH?!" His voice rose alarmingly at the end, ringing sharply into the empty air.

"Well, duh," Blaise answered matter-of-factly.

Slightly put out, Nott lowered his eyes to the ground and began ripping up blades of grass. He continued in a more reasonable tone, "I guess... it's because of my parents."

Harry frowned, thinking of Malfoy's remarks earlier that day...

"...Of course, I suppose it wouldn't matter one blood traitor to another..."

"...I'm not surprised. Cowardice does run in the family, after all..."

"...I see Nott's finally found someone else to fight his battles for him. Like father like son, eh? She won't last long either..."

"You know how our house is all about pureblood loyalty, and all that rot?" Nott stated more than asked.

"You mean... like Voldemort?" Harry whispered, eyes hardening.

Nott couldn't hold back the flinch most wizards gave at the hated name, but he nodded all the same.

"Are there really that many supporters in our house?" Blaise asked with slight worry in her voice. "I know they're all anti-Muggle bigots, but-"

"You'd be surprised how many Slytherins have parents who were once Death Eaters," Nott said. "I know that some, like Lucius Malfoy, Draco's dad, managed to weasel out of a prison sentence by claiming they never joined of their own free will-"

Harry snorted.

"-and then there's Crabbe, Goyle, Jugson in sixth year, his pal Avery, Rookwood's father is even in the Ministry-"

Harry was starting to feel a little less safe about his dormitory. No wonder so many of the older years were always sneering at the 'Boy-Who-Lived.' And all this time, Harry had just assumed it was his penchant for trouble that kept him on their bad side...

"-and then there's-" Nott paused, glancing at Harry, before he gave Blaise a searching look. "Well, there are several others..." he trailed off.

Without noticing the odd expression on Nott's face, Blaise asked, "So, what does that have to do with you?"

Nott's eyes purposely avoid hers for a moment. Then he glanced directly at Harry, as though bracing himself, and said, "My father was Death Eater, as well."

You could have heard the sound of a pin drop in the silence that followed.

"What?" Blaise gasped.

Harry simply narrowed his eyes and waited to see where Nott was going with this. There was obviously more to the story. Why else would the Slytherins treat him so horribly if he was just like them?

"It happened while my mother was still pregnant," he began, staring at the growing pile of shredded grass as though he weren't really seeing it. "My father was pressured into joining the Dark Lord's ranks, like most Purebloods were at the time. He didn't really have a choice. I suppose some part of him also supported their ideals at the time because he certainly wasn't allied with Dumbledore's lot.

"My mother didn't really want anything to do with the war; she simply wanted to survive it. She never approved of my father's choices, either, but wasn't the type to argue against her husband. It went on like that for a while, my father doing the Dark Lord's bidding, and my mother just waiting for his return while in the care of the house-elves. Then something changed.

"My father began to receive more dangerous missions, the kind that involved more hands-on work, like attacks on actual Wizards, rather than just baiting a Muggle every now and then. He was ordered to raid the homes of people who were openly opposing the Dark Lord. I doubt my father reveled in the amount of blood he was forced to shed. He wasn't quite as far gone as some Death Eaters who took the title a bit literally..."

Harry and Blaise listened with growing horror as Nott spoke. This really was the first time they'd gotten such a blatant description of the days when Voldemort reigned. It was one thing to hear about a Dark Wizard defeated by Harry Potter; it was quite another to hear of his exploits described in such detail.

"My father couldn't handle it anymore. Just imagine being told to murder *children* simply because of their parents' stand in the war... And then to come home every day, to your *pregnant* wife, knowing just how much innocent blood was on your hands..."

"What did he do?" Harry asked in a hushed voice. He had a feeling this story was about to get a whole lot worse.

"He tried to run," Nott answered, letting out a bitter laugh at just how foolish such an action was. "He should have known better- hell, maybe he did- but no one just *quits* the Death Eaters! Once you've been Marked, you're in it until the day you die.

"After only a week of ignoring the summons, they came to my parents' house. My father told them to leave, said he was giving up, and even *promised* to stay out of the Dark Lord's way! His old *friends* didn't care for that much. They blasted down the door and tortured my father for his impertinence.

"My mother came downstairs when she heard the commotion. She screamed and begged them to stop. Of course, they didn't listen, only laughed. Then she tried to fight them off- my pregnant, meek little mother, who couldn't even argue against my father, tried to take on a bunch of Death Eaters! They disarmed her easily, and she could only watch as they tortured my father for *hours*...

"They even hit her with the *Cruciatus* a few times, just for their sick amusement. They finally killed my father, when there wasn't much left anyway, and left my mother sobbing over his body-"

There was quite a large pile of pulverized grass beneath Nott's shaking hands now. None of the three first years noticed, too busy trying to understand all they were hearing.

"The Aurors finally showed up, far too late to actually do anything. My father's funeral was short (just another faceless name for the *Prophet's* obituaries), and my mother went to live with her aunt in France. She had me a few months later, and the healers were worried there would be complications, but I was fine in the end. My mother, though, has never been the same according to my great-aunt. I wouldn't know. She does act a little odd sometimes, as though my

father's still around, like he's only gone on a trip somewhere. Her memory isn't so good, either. They say it's all a side-effect of the *Cruciatius* and the overall trauma of the event..."

Blaise's face crumpled and she placed a hesitant hand on Nott's shoulder. He sighed, but let it stay.

"Well, that's really all there is. I'm sure almost anyone with ties to the Death Eaters has heard about my father's *cowardice*, and that my mother is a *nutter*," he hissed angrily.

None of them said anything for a moment. Then Harry's eyes met Blaise's over Nott's head, and he nodded at the unspoken message. *'Might as well share after Nott spilled his guts like that...'*

"I guess you know all about my family," Harry said, then chuckled weakly. "Probably more than I do, actually, with all that 'Boy-Who-Lived' nonsense. But I'm sure I could let you in on a few things the textbooks have missed out on..."

Nott glanced up in interest.

Harry took in a deep breath. "Well, did you know that Blaise and I live in a Muggle orphanage?"

The other boy's gobsmacked expression was all the answer they needed.

"What?!" Nott was aghast. "They left Harry-Bloody-Potter in an orphanage? Why didn't they leave you with a wizarding family, or something? I mean, just about anyone would have taken you in without a moment's consideration!"

"Yeah, right," Harry scowled, less than grateful to the nameless wizards who would have jumped at the chance to adopt a celebrity. "I was supposed to be with my Muggle relatives, actually." He didn't bother to elaborate. Harry refused to even think about the Dursleys.

"That's right," Nott muttered to himself. "I had heard about that... But then, why don't you still live with them?" he asked in confusion.

"Let's just say that my aunt and uncle aren't exactly... *magic-friendly*... and leave it at that," Harry answered evasively.

"And that's how he met yours truly!" Blaise jumped in with an extra dose of cheer to clear the heavy atmosphere. The tension seeping out Harry was nearly palpable, and she caught his grateful glance from the corner of her eye.

"I've been at St. Margaret's since I was about..." Blaise paused, "two, I think. Don't remember a thing about my own parents, but I don't mind so much anymore. I mean, I'm happy with my life, and I've got my best friends here of course-" Blaise threw an arm around both Harry and Nott, who had gone rather still all of a sudden.

"I do wonder who they were sometimes," Blaise added in a wistful tone, "especially now, since they could have been a witch and wizard! But... they must have died a long time ago, since my files- the ones Harry and I stole from the caretaker's office- say that I was brought in by social services, and I've still got my last name, after all..."

Harry bestowed a look of sympathy on Blaise, which she purposely ignored. She could be as tight-lipped about her past as Harry sometimes, and it had never occurred to him that Blaise might be curious about her parents these days. It made sense, though. Blaise could very well have been of magic descent, even if she did somehow end up in the care of Muggles after her parents died. Harry was basically in the same predicament, after all.

On Blaise's other side, Nott seemed uncomfortable with the new information about both of his friends. It wasn't only the shock that they came from an orphanage, which shouldn't have been surprising when they were both orphans and knew little to nothing about Wizard culture... But hearing Blaise talk about her family as if she knew *nothing*... It made Nott want to speak up, but a part of him sealed the words in his throat before they could do irreparable damage to the cheerful girl.

"Well, Zabini..." he started, unsure of where take the conversation.

"Blaise," she interrupted.

"What?"

"You should call me *Blaise*," she reiterated. She held up one finger as though preparing for a lecture. "We are *friends*, after all-"

Her tone hinted toward pain if he disagreed this time.

"-so you should call us by our first names! C'mon, you know you want to..." Blaise grinned cheekily and pulled Harry over so suddenly that he nearly fell into her lap. Then she pointed to each of them and said slowly and deliberately, "After me now, H-A-R-R-Y... and B-L-A-I-S-E..."

Nott seemed unamused, especially when Blaise turned her finger on him and declared imperiously, "And you shall be-"

"Theodore," he interrupted before she could name him something ridiculous, as someone of Blaise's standards was apt to do.

Blaise made a face at that, and even Harry shook his head negatively.

"No way! That's so... *proper*..."

"It's my name," Nott said dryly.

"No!" Blaise thought for a moment before gaining a look of enlightenment. "Your name is... Theo!"

"Theo...?" Harry repeated, testing the name out.

The newly dubbed 'Theo' sputtered, "W-what? Absolutely not-"

"Yes it is!"

"No way-"

"Don't argue with me! The Great Blaise has spoken!"

"The Great Wha-"

Harry glanced between the other two. Blaise had both arms crossed over her chest stubbornly, in a familiar stance that Harry recognized

as inarguable. Poor 'Theo' just looked well and truly lost in the conversation, as though wondering how it could have spun so completely out of his control.

"Back off, Theo, or I'll-"

"My name isn't-"

"-turn your hair PINK again!"

"You wouldn't dare-"

"Wanna bet?"

"I'm warning you-"

"Oh, *you're* warning *me*-"

"Yes, I am, *Blaise*-"

Harry rolled his eyes. At least one thing was back to normal; those two were incorrigible... Suddenly, he caught sight of a familiar bird approaching over the lake. "Look, it's Hedwig!" Harry pointed out, and if it distracted the bickering first years, then all the better.

"Huh?"

Blaise dropped her hands from where they had been inching up Theo's throat, and the oblivious boy turned his head to glance up at the sky with the other two.

Sure enough, a brilliant speck of white was traveling across the grounds, growing closer to the group with every sweep of her wings.

Theo watched the owl approach curiously. "Isn't that Pot- I mean, *Harry's* owl?"

"Yeah," the aforementioned boy answered absently. "I wonder what she wants?"

He raised one arm in an impromptu perch as Hedwig descended. The owl landed gracefully, her talons digging into the sleeve of his robe as she folded her wings.

"Hey, girl," Harry greeted, as Hedwig nibbled his ear affectionately.

"Oh, she's got a letter!" Blaise pointed towards the scroll tied sloppily to the owl's leg.

Harry unrolled the scrap of parchment and allowed his eyes to scan over the familiar writing.

"It's from Hagrid," he announced without looking up.

"The Groundskeeper?" Theo asked. "What does he want with you two?" His voice took on a wary tone. "You haven't done anything stupid, have you?"

"No!" Blaise scowled, offended. Then she paused in thought and mumbled, "Well, not yet, anyway..."

"It says he wants us to come down to his hut as soon as possible..." Harry trailed off, gripping the letter tightly. "He wants to show us something..."

Both Harry and Blaise gulped. Anything Hagrid found interesting tended to leave emotional scars. After all, Fluffy and the trip into the Forbidden Forest had both ended as a near-death experience. They highly doubted Hagrid was looking for a simple chat about Nicolas Flamel. The idea of another slaving, three-headed pet sounding very likely.

Theo watched their skin take on an unhealthy hue as the two exchanged a frightened glance.

"Am I missing something...?"

Harry accepted the chipped teacup with a pleasant smile, holding that same polite grin as Hagrid set a small platter of rock cakes in front of him as well. The furniture gave a noticeable groan, and Harry

imagined that the crack in the old wooden tabletop had stretched just a few more jagged inches...

Blaise sat on his left, nursing her own piping hot tea, and trying to ignore the sagging muzzle buried on her lap, a long string of sticky drool oozing down her school robes. Theo took up the chair on Harry's right, looking rather out of place as he stared around the cluttered wooden house with barely concealed disdain. Sometimes Harry forgot just how *Pureblood* the other boy was. He held back a snicker as Theo took a dainty bite out of one of proffered cakes. His jaw froze mid-bite in an expression of pain. He carefully placed it back on his plate, and Harry took note of the miniscule indentations of teeth that had barely made it past the rock-hard crust.

Harry pushed his own saucer away and met Hagrid's beetle-black gaze. "So, what did you want to show us, Hagrid?"

"Ready to spill the beans on Flamel?" Blaise hinted, while making a futile effort to shove Fang off her lap. His tail thumped happily against the floor as he continued to drool.

Hagrid scowled at the girl. "Now wha' did I tell yeh about tha--"

"Don't worry, Hagrid," Harry hurried to placate him, "she was just kidding!"

Theo took a gulp of tea to hide his snort. Harry and Blaise could use a few lessons in subtlety. No wonder they couldn't get anything about that Flamel person! They were such *Gryffindors* sometimes...

Blaise felt a sudden urge to kick Theo under the table. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do... Now, if only she could get the dog off of her legs...

Her attention was drawn away from Fang, fortunately for both he and Theo, when Hagrid started poking around by the fireplace. She had noticed that he seemed preoccupied by something while setting out the tea. Blaise could see an old cauldron hanging over the fire at the moment. She wondered if Hagrid was trying to cook something... Blaise shuddered. She hoped he wasn't expecting them to eat it.

Harry happened to notice the black cauldron as well, although for an entirely different reason. He had sworn for a moment that he could hear a broken hissing coming from somewhere in the cabin, and yet, Sneak had definitely stayed behind at the castle. The cold weather had made him irritable as of late, and the snake had refused to leave Harry's bed, not even for the cleaning house-elves.

There is was again! Harry glanced around, first under the table, and then at the rafters. There had to be a snake around there somewhere... And then Harry realized that the sound was originating from behind Hagrid, just as the giant man stooped over to stir up the dwindling flames.

"Hagrid, what's that over there?" he finally asked.

Hagrid straightened abruptly, nearly knocking his head on the mantle. He rocked forward on his toes awkwardly, and flushed behind his bushy beard. It was the sort of guilty grin that you would expect to see on a child who had just broken into the cookie jar and gotten away with it. It was the kind of glee that Blaise herself had displayed after finishing her Charms essay- the one she had picked up off the common room table and signed her name to. It was the sort of expression that made Harry worry.

"Well, yeh see..." Hagrid stalled, fiddling nervously with a pair of oven mitts. "I got it off a bloke in the pub down in Hogsmead- won it in a game, actually! He was awfully sportin' to give up such a prize, and I've wanted one as long as I can remember..."

"Yes, but what *is* it?" Blaise interrupted impatiently.

Hagrid gave her a wide smile, not at all put off, and lifted the small cauldron off of the fire. He tilted the rim just enough to give the others a good look at the contents, specifically the shiny black egg inside.

"An egg?" Harry frowned, having never seen one so big. '*Or quite so active,*' he thought, as it shook around a bit, tapping against the iron walls very much like a fussy baby in its crib.

As Harry peered at the wiggling egg, Blaise and Theo left their seats to get a closer look. Blaise was daring enough to poke the black shell,

flinching from the heat it put off. Theo just stared into the cauldron with a dumbfounded expression on his face. He jerked away with a little shriek as his mind caught up with what he was seeing.

“BLOODY HELL!”

“What?” Blaise also jumped, startled when the boy started to back away from the innocent-looking egg.

“IT’S A BLOODY DRAGON!” Theo told them, a hysterical pitch in his voice.

“WHAT?”

“Hagrid!” Harry gasped. “That thing’s an actual dragon?”

“Yep!” he nodded emphatically, the same excitement as before in his eyes. “The lil’ fellow should be hatchin’ any time now!”

“Hatching?” Blaise repeated faintly.

“Hagrid, you live in a *wooden* house... How are you supposed to raise a *fire-breathing* dragon by yourself?” Harry pointed out the rather obvious fact. He hoped Hagrid would see the light now, so they could put this entire business out of the way before it got out of hand.

No such luck.

“Well, I was sorta hopin’ you two would help me out,” Hagrid said hopefully. “O’ course Theo here’s more n’ welcome to join in!” He said this as though it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and quite the treat for the boy.

“Um, actually...” Theo had somehow backtracked all the way to the front door by now, and was trying to make a quick exit while he had the chance.

“He’d be delighted!” Blaise cut off whatever excuses he was about to make.

“What!” Theo squawked.

Blaise managed to maneuver herself right beside him so that she could speak without Hagrid overhearing. "If we're going down, you're going with us!" she whispered in a menacing tone. Raising it to a normal decibel, she added, "That's what friends are for, after all!"

Theo groaned. Really, he was starting to prefer enemies.

REVIEW!!

Finally, the chapter is done! It's a little short for me, but I just wanted to post something.

Coming next, according to our favorite Slytherin Trio:

"A dragon? Is Hagrid insane- Wait, forget I asked."

"Do we really have to get involved? Or rather, do you two have to drag me down with you?"

"Screw the dragon, it's almost Christmas! I've been a very good girl, Santa Clause!"

"Are you kidding?"

"Did you say something, Theo?"

"Erm- Oh, would you look at that! Better hurry, or I'll miss the train!"

"You're not staying?"

"Nah, just try not to get into too much trouble while I'm gone, guys."

"Oh, come on, what could possibly happen?"

"..."

"..."

